HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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

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§ Members of the Government listed under more than one Department

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

Monday 11 July 2016

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Disadvantaged Families and Children: Life Chances

1. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the life chances of the most disadvantaged children and families. [905748]

11. Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the life chances of the most disadvantaged children and families. [905760]

20. Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the life chances of the most disadvantaged children and families. [905769]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Stephen Crabb): The Government are committed to tackling disadvantage and extending opportunity so that everyone has the chance to realise their full potential. Our life chances approach will focus on tackling the root causes of poverty, such as worklessness, educational attainment and family stability.

Sir David Amess: While I welcome my right hon. Friend’s recognition that strong and stable families make an enormous impact on children’s life chances, will he spell out to the House precisely what his Department is doing to ensure that those relationships are fostered and strengthened, particularly in a coastal town such as Southend?

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend is exactly right: family stability is a really important part of our mission to tackle entrenched disadvantage. That is why we have doubled funding for relationship support to £70 million and are significantly expanding support for parents. In addition, through our local family offer, we are working with 12 local authorities, including his own in Essex, to learn how best to strengthen the support they offer to families.

Oliver Colvile: As my right hon. Friend might know, there is a 12-year difference in life expectancy between one side of my city of Plymouth and the other. What advice would he give to improve chances and life expectancy in Plymouth?

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend is right that such inequality is unacceptable in Britain today, and that is why our life chances approach includes a set of statutory and non-statutory indicators that will drive action to tackle the wide range of complex and deep-rooted factors that can trap people in poverty, damaging their health and preventing them from making the most of their lives.

Lucy Allan: I would like to thank the Prime Minister for his amazing work on the life chances strategy. I hope that every Member, on both sides of the House, will continue to pursue this aim.

The troubled families programme has been a huge success, but does the Secretary of State agree that it could more positively be labelled the “supported families” initiative?

Stephen Crabb: I agree very much with my hon. Friend’s point about the leadership role that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has played—it has been critical in driving this agenda forward—and I am delighted...
that the future Prime Minister also shares his commitment. My hon. Friend is also right about the troubled families programme. It is important that we stay positive about the changes and that we do not stigmatise any particular communities, families or households.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Secretary of State has mentioned support for working parents several times, but those hit hardest by the Government’s cuts to in-work support for parents are single parents—those who least deserve it—so, on this issue and that of helping single parents, will he think again?

Stephen Crabb: I share the hon. Lady’s passion for helping single parents. The current statistics all demonstrate and underline that when lone parents are supported back into work, they can achieve remarkable things in bringing children in those households out of poverty. The trends are moving in the right direction. She should welcome initiatives such as universal credit and our support for childcare costs.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Does the Secretary of State agree that efforts to improve the life chances of disadvantaged children and families will be undermined by neglecting the importance of current income levels?

Stephen Crabb: I have always been very clear that income levels are important—a regular income is vital for families in difficult circumstances—but it is important that we look beyond that and, for the first time as a nation, start to tackle the underlying root causes of entrenched poverty.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Last year, child poverty increased by 200,000 as a direct result of the Government’s tax and social security policies, with two thirds of these children living in working households, and it is estimated that by 2020 more than 3.6 million children will be living in poverty. There is overwhelming evidence that child poverty has a direct and negative impact on children’s social, emotional and cognitive outcomes and ultimately on their life expectancy. Given the catastrophic consequences of Government policy implemented on scant evidence, will the Secretary of State do the right thing and repeal the damaging effects of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, which threaten the life chances of these children?

Stephen Crabb: I welcome the hon. Lady to her new position on the Front Bench. Given her work in the Select Committee, I am sure she will do an excellent job in the shadow role.

The 200,000 figure that the hon. Lady mentioned exactly points to what was wrong with the previous relative income approach, which her previous Government took to tackling poverty. When real wages grow, poverty rates increase, despite people’s incomes not falling. It is much more important to tackle the underlying causes of poverty—worklessness, educational failure, family stability, problem debt and addictions.

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that Norwich is challenged by social mobility as per the social mobility index of earlier this year. Does he agree with me that it takes all parts of the community to come together to address these kind of problems, including the private sector and the third sector, and that constituency MPs can also play a key role in leading these things?

Stephen Crabb: I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend. The work she has championed in Norwich is a good example of local action, showing where local MPs can indeed be the champions. Much as we might want to talk about national levels of poverty and social mobility, it is much more important to understand what is going on at a local level and to drive local action with effective partnerships.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Many disadvantaged families have an older disabled relative, including 2,000 in my constituency who receive attendance allowance. The Government have said that they will scrap attendance allowance and pass funding to councils. When are the Government going to consult formally on those plans?

Stephen Crabb: The Government have not said that they are going to scrap attendance allowance. We are looking at options for devolving it to the local authority level, but we have been absolutely clear that this does not mean a cut to supporting attendance allowance. It is about looking at more effective ways of delivering it at the local level to achieve what it is intended to achieve.

UK Pensioners Abroad

2. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What assessment has the Minister made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on British pensioners living overseas?

Mr Vara: There will be no immediate changes, as a result of the referendum, in the circumstances of British pensioners. Negotiations for Britain’s future relationship with Europe will begin under the new Prime Minister.

Mr Cunningham: What discussions has the Minister had with European countries about the exchange rate and its effect on pensioners abroad?

Mr Vara: As I say, the negotiations proper will begin when we have a new Prime Minister. In the meantime, we have a European unit that has been set up in the Cabinet Office, and it will report to the new Cabinet in due course.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): But would it not make sense for the Department for Work and Pensions to do some investigative work now, when there are thousands if not millions of British pensioners living elsewhere in the European Union? Those people currently have free access, for example, to the NHS in their local areas without contributing, but they might suddenly find their finances to be in dire jeopardy and wish to return to this country. Should not the DWP act immediately? Let me gently suggest to the Minister that just waiting as if the new Prime Minister is going to be some way away might be a bit of a mistake?
Mr Vara: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are working closely with the new European unit set up in the Cabinet Office, to which I referred in my previous answer.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): This is about doing what is right. We are talking about British pensioners living overseas who have paid national insurance. Why not remove that uncertainty? Why not guarantee what they are entitled to? It is all about doing the right thing with a new Prime Minister. Let us get off on the right foot and make sure that happens.

Mr Vara: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, but we need to have the new Prime Minister in place before those negotiations can start proper.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister not aware that the role of pensioners is a very sophisticated and complex one? Many of them depend for support on free access to their relatives in this country and on freedom to travel, as do young people going to places such as Spain to work. Has the Minister not already looked at this in some detail?

Mr Vara: As I said, the result of the referendum came only some few days ago, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that detailed conversations are going on in the Cabinet unit. Let me provide him with the further assurance that Britain still remains a member of the EU. I want to reassure British people living in EU countries and those EU citizens who are living in the UK that there will be no immediate changes in their circumstances.

Workplace Pensions: Automatic Enrolment

3. David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): What progress his Department has made on auto-enrolling people into workplace pensions. [905750]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Shailesh Vara): Automatic enrolment has been a great success with nearly 6.3 million people automatically enrolled into a workplace pension by almost 143,000 employers. We will continue with our programme to get many more people enrolled.

David Mowat: Auto-enrolment has met or exceeded all initial targets. However, to maximise pensions in the long term, we need to bear down on charges. Two years ago, the Government put in place a cap of 0.75%, which is half that permitted by the Opposition when they had one for stakeholders. The Government said they would review the level of the cap, with a view to it being lower in future. Will the Minister update us on the status of that review?

Mr Vara: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this very important issue. I can give him an assurance that, in 2017, we will review whether the level of the charge cap should change, and whether to include some or all transaction costs in the cap.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Minister will know that in September last year, in evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee, the Economic Secretary said that if there was not transparency and comparability in fees, the Government would legislate. Does he think there has been transparency? If not, when will he legislate?

Mr Vara: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point. We are committed to transparency and openness, and, when opportunity allows, to putting them into place in legislation.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on the successful roll-out of auto-enrolment. What more could be done to help the self-employed to engage in the process?

Mr Vara: We are working very closely with the Pensions Regulator to ensure the whole programme of auto-enrolment is easily understood, in particular for self-employed people and those who have one or two employees, so that the rules are in very clear easy-to-use language on the website and in offline literature and any other offline facilities.

State Pension Age: Transitional Protection for Women

4. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to introduce transitional protection for women adversely affected by the acceleration of increases in the state pension age. [905752]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Shailesh Vara): Transitional arrangements are already in place. We committed over £1 billion to lessen the impact of the changes for those worst affected, so that no one will see their pension age change by more than 18 months compared with the previous timetable. We have no plans for further changes.

Jessica Morden: My constituent who turned 60 this year has not received any information about the changes. She was the primary carer of her children and now cannot work because of disability, but now looks forward to having to work another six years. The Minister has been presented with many proposals, including transitional arrangements. When will the Government give these women the justice they deserve?

Mr Vara: The hon. Lady refers to notice. At the time of the Pensions Act 2011, more than 5 million affected people did receive notification. That was done using the addresses Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs then had. As far as the proposals are concerned, they all, regretfully, cost a huge amount of money. We therefore have no plans to go down that route.

Barbara Keeley: In reality, it is the 1950s-born women who are bearing the cost. My constituent is 62-years-old and is about to be made redundant in July. She suffers with diabetes, a heart condition and COPD. She tells me that, owing to limited childcare, she worked part-time when her family were young and could not contribute to her pension. She is now very anxious that she will never be able to secure another job, and will not receive
her state pension until she is 66. She has a large black hole now in her life. How does the Minister advise her on facing that bleak future?

Mr Vara: I assure the hon. Lady that, under the coalition Government and the present Government, we have record levels of employment for women, including older women. That is something to bear in mind. We are working extensively with employers to ensure they appreciate the value of older workers, which they do. That is why we have record levels of employment, particularly for women.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I suspect that most hon. Members have been acquainted with difficult cases like the one mentioned by the hon. Lady. Will my hon. Friend the Minister keep an open mind on pension credit arrangements for these people? They are, after all, means-tested and could deal with the worst hardship cases.

Mr Vara: We do have particular criteria and where people fit that criteria, they will of course qualify for whatever benefit it is they are seeking guidance on.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Two thousand women in Dudley North worked hard to save and plan for their retirement, but have been affected by the changes. Will the Minister meet me, my constituent Hilary Henderson and the other women from Dudley North to discuss the changes in detail? If not, why not?

Mr Vara: I recently met the leaders of the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign, and I have met many members of the campaign in my constituency, so I am very well aware of all the details and facts. As the hon. Gentleman knows, there have also been a huge number of debates about the subject in the Chamber in recent weeks.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Given the imminent takeover by the new Prime Minister, who herself falls into the category of women affected by the pension changes, would this not be the ideal moment to look again at the various proposals that have been advanced for much fairer transitional arrangements—such as the one from Mariana Robinson of Wales—for all the women who do not have a prime ministerial salary to fall back on?

Mr Vara: I remind the House that in 2012 the DWP conducted a survey and found that only 6% of women who were due to retire within the next 10 years were unaware of an increase in the pension age. As I said earlier, the Government have no plans to review the matter.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): A little over a week ago, thousands of women from across the United Kingdom came to Parliament in a display of solidarity that reminded me very much of the Dagenham women some decades earlier. Is not the Secretary of State’s refusal to revisit the financial issues faced by the 2.6 million women whose pension ages have been increased without adequate notice a slap in the face for those women? Given that the former Pensions Minister admitted that the coalition Government had got it wrong, why is the Under-Secretary being so unreasonable?

Mr Vara: I find it deeply regrettable that Opposition parties seek to make capital at the Dispatch Box, and indeed from the Back Benches, when they do not have a solid proposal. They cannot provide a proper, credible solution that will ensure that the financial position of the country is taken into account. I might add that if the Opposition parties are so keen on this issue, they should bear in mind that although the Pensions Act came into being in 2011, the issue was not raised in any of their manifestos.

Policy Implications of Leaving the EU

5. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential policy implications for his Department of the UK leaving the EU.

[905753]

12. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential policy implications for his Department of the UK leaving the EU.

[905761]

21. Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential policy implications for his Department of the UK leaving the EU.

[905770]

22. Michelle Thomson (Edinburgh West) (Ind): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the outcome of the EU referendum on welfare spending.

[905771]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Stephen Crabb): The British people have voted to leave the European Union, and the referendum decision must be respected and delivered. My Department is working closely with the EU unit that has been set up in the Cabinet Office, and we will be working with the next Prime Minister and the rest of the Cabinet as we forge a new path for the country.

Alan Brown: The European Union has provided a number of legal protections involving equality and human rights for disabled people. Given the delay in the publication of the Green Paper on the Work and Health programme, what plans has the Department to protect those rights following Brexit?

Stephen Crabb: No one with a disability or a long-term health condition should have any fear whatsoever about what will happen in the coming months and years as we negotiate Britain’s exit from the European Union. We are absolutely committed to protecting rights for disabled people in this country, and the Green Paper, which we will publish in the autumn, will outline our proposals for reforming systems in order to give better support to people with disabilities and long-term health conditions.

Patricia Gibson: Last week the Under-Secretary of State for disabled people confirmed that the Green Paper and the long-promised Work and Health programme for disabled people remained a priority for the Government. In the light of the current uncertainty, will the Secretary of State give us an assurance and a clear commitment that sufficient funds for that support are ring-fenced and the programme is guaranteed?
Stephen Crabb: The money has already been announced by the Chancellor on successive occasions, and it is there, waiting to be used. When the hon. Lady reads the Green Paper, which we hope to publish later this year, she will see how we will use it to develop longer-term reform options to provide better support for people with disabilities and close the disability employment gap. I think there is cross-party support for that in the House.

Owen Thompson: Cuts in support for people who have been placed in the employment and support allowance work-related activity group from April 2017 will leave many sick and disabled people in the dark, and potentially without the protections provided by the European Union. Will the Secretary of State, unlike the Brexiteers, give us some assurance that the Government actually have a plan for the Green Paper to give back, so that those who are affected by these changes are accurately assessed and are recognised and valued by the state?

Stephen Crabb: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the need to recognise and protect people with these health conditions, and we are absolutely committed to doing that. I do not want to repeat the answer that I gave earlier, but we have money set aside, and we will publish the Green Paper later this year. It will set out clear reform options which I hope will command support from Members on both sides of the House, and also from disability organisations.

Mr Speaker: Michelle Thomson—not here.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the most important policy developments is the fact that, once we have left the EU, decisions by his Department relating to eligibility for benefits will no longer be at risk of being overturned by the European Court of Justice?

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: there will be that freedom in the future, but there are more options we can develop right now, even while we are still in the EU, for further ensuring that we have a fair benefits system that does not act as an unnatural draw for more migrants. We want people to come here, work and bring their talents, but we do not want the benefits system inflating those migration numbers.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The lack of planning by this Government post-Brexit is complacency verging on neglect. The FTSE 250 has already lost 10% of its value since the referendum outcome and that will impact on pension funds. Given that 5,000 of the 6,000 defined benefit pension schemes are currently in deficit and that the pensions regulator has raised concerns of additional risks to these schemes following the Brexit decision, what is the Secretary of State doing to protect the pensions of the millions of people who will be affected?

Stephen Crabb: Nothing fundamentally has changed since the outcome of the referendum: the economy continues to perform well and, as I said, we need to be careful that we do not do our bit in talking down the economy at this time. The Opposition want to do their bit, they can stand up and talk down the British economy at this time.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): One thing that we do know has happened is the fall in the pound. That has resulted in making our exports much cheaper and imports more expensive. Employers have already said that that will lead to more business and jobs. Does the Minister agree that that would be helpful to him in reducing the number of unemployed?

Stephen Crabb: The truth is that right in front of us now, since the outcome of the referendum, we have a mixture of opportunities and challenges. It is incumbent upon us to turn those challenges into opportunities, and we are determined as a Government to do so. If the Opposition want to do their bit, they can stand up and not talk down the British economy at this time.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Already during this Parliament the Government’s austerity cuts have taken more than £12 billion out of the pockets of low-income households, mostly through changes initiated by the DWP. With many economists predicting a further recession as a consequence of Brexit, and the pound now less stable than Bitcoin, will the Secretary of State assure me that he will not allow those on low and middle incomes to bear the brunt of further economic downturn?

Stephen Crabb: On previous occasions I have set out the broad approach I take to welfare reform. With regard to issues in Scotland, with which I know the hon. Lady is primarily concerned, she should be aware that I had a very constructive meeting last week with her colleague Angela Constance, the welfare Minister in the Scottish Parliament. We remain absolutely committed to giving the Scottish Government the new welfare powers agreed to in the Scotland Act 2016.

Dr Whiteford: In the past week, for the fourth year in a row, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority has given the roll-out of personal independence payments an “amber/red” rating, indicating that “successful delivery of the project/programme is in doubt with major risks apparent in a number of key areas” and adding that “urgent action” is needed to address the problems. What is the Secretary of State going to do...
to fix these problems, and how does he intend to protect his Department’s projects from the impending doom of a Cabinet full of Brexiteers?

Stephen Crabb: Any big project, whether it is the introduction of universal credit or the roll-out of PIP, carries substantial risks, and I think theIPA report recognised that fact. In the past four months, since I have been in the Department, I have been committed to driving through improvements to the PIP process. PIP still commands broad support across disability organisations, which recognise that it is a much better benefit than the old-style disability living allowance.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): On the one hand, Lush cosmetics has just announced that it is going to move most of its production overseas, because it says that its workers do not feel welcome here, while on the other hand there are those in the food and farming sector, 38% of whose workforce comes from overseas, who are saying that they could go out of business because they will not be able to find people to employ. What is the Department doing to protect jobs in the south-west in the wake of the Brexit vote?

Stephen Crabb: The Department has clear plans in place for any significant increase in unemployment, whether in a particular local region or right across the UK. We have contingency plans for dealing with up-ticks in unemployment. However, we need to be really careful that we do not exaggerate the bad news that the hon. Lady might think is out there. There are opportunities for this country in terms of trade deals and of securing new investment, such as the investment from Boeing that was announced today. There are also serious risks and challenges, and we need to be clear-sighted and prepared for those.

Workless Households

6. Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): What progress his Department is making on reducing the number of workless households.  

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Stephen Crabb): The number of workless households is now the lowest on record. Since 2010, it has fallen by more than 750,000.

Dr Davies: In Rhyl and district, the number of people requiring support through the Work programme for the long-term unemployed has dropped from 400 to 150 over the past 18 months. That is good news, but jobseeker’s allowance and employment and support allowance claimant rates in parts of Rhyl remain concerning, and the Work programme delivery company has recently closed its principal office in the town. Can the Minister assure me that the new Work and Health programme will take particular account of individuals who are less receptive to intervention and who need more intensive input?

Stephen Crabb: Absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The new Work and Health programme is being designed precisely to help those people who face multiple and complex barriers to getting into work. Beyond that, our upcoming Green Paper will look at the additional ways in which we can reduce the disability employment gap in the longer term. Of course, GPs play a key role in supporting those people, and I look forward to meeting my hon. Friend and his GP colleagues to discuss these important issues further.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Given that the Work programmes have been cut by 87% and that the Secretary of State now knows who the next Prime Minister will be, will he confirm today that he will lobby her to increase the funding for the system that the Green Paper will produce? Will he also confirm the timetable for its roll-out?

Stephen Crabb: I am pleased to be able to tell the hon. Gentleman that the next Prime Minister of this country absolutely shares my passion and commitment to a one nation vision of our society, to breaking down barriers and disadvantage and to ending inequalities. We await the specific decisions that the new Prime Minister will take on the important issues we are discussing today.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Building on the point about the significantly reduced amount of funding available for the Work and Health programme, what assurances will the Secretary of State be able to give us if, in the light of Brexit, we see a significant increase in the number of people looking for work generally? How on earth will a reduced programme be able to serve everybody?

Stephen Crabb: The important point to make to my hon. Friend is that the Work and Health programme is just one part of a wider package of initiatives that we are taking forward to close the disability employment gap and to provide better support for people with long-term health conditions. I shall not repeat what I said in response to earlier questions, but the Green Paper that we are publishing later this year will outline the full range of reform options that we are interested in taking forward.

Child Poverty

7. Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effect of recent changes to benefits on the number of children living in poverty.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Stephen Crabb): We know that work is the best route out of poverty. The number of people in work is at a record high and the number of children living in a household where no one works has fallen by 450,000 since 2010.

Shabana Mahmood: My constituency has the third highest level of child poverty in the country, and 13,600 families currently receive tax credits, leaving them vulnerable to the Government’s cuts to universal credit. In his aborted bid for the Tory leadership, the Secretary of State said that he had a “strong grasp of…the social and economic divisions in our country”. If that is true, does he agree that cuts to universal credit will only compound the social and economic divisions in our country? Will he now commit to reversing those changes so that our children do not have to pay the price of his Government’s political choices?
Stephen Crabb: I absolutely stand by what I said. There was a massive expansion of tax credits under the previous Labour Government, but it did not do a single thing to tackle the underlying causes of poverty. Universal credit is just one part of what we are doing. There is the national living wage, which the Labour party used to support at one time, and the increase in personal allowances. We are in the business of transforming the landscape for people on low incomes. That is why the figures are moving in the right direction.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Whatever the recent changes to benefits, they do not seem to have dealt with the big issue of personal independence payments—PIP. I recently had to deal with a horrendous case in which an individual in my constituency should have received PIP, but did not and had to go through the appeal process. I wrote to the Minister and the Government just ignored it. What are the Government doing to ensure that people who should be in receipt of PIP get it early and are not left to wallow while waiting for a long time, as they have been recently?

Stephen Crabb: The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People or I will be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that specific case. As for the broader principles behind the question, we are improving the PIP process, speeding up applications, decisions and appeals. If the hon. Gentleman has specific concerns, I would be happy to meet him to discuss them further.

Disability Employment Gap

8. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps he is taking to support people with disabilities and health conditions who are looking for work. [905757]

15. Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to support people with disabilities and health conditions who are looking for work. [905764]

16. Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): What steps he is taking to support people with disabilities and health conditions who are looking for work. [905765]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): This Government are committed to halving the disability employment gap. In the spending review we announced a real-terms spending increase on supporting disabled people into work. In the past two years, 365,000 disabled people have entered employment. Our forthcoming Green Paper will set out our plans to support more disabled people into work.

Luke Hall: Over 99% of VAT-registered enterprises in my constituency are small and medium-sized enterprises. Will my hon. Friend update the House on what he is doing to help smaller businesses get the support they need to recruit people with disabilities and health conditions?

Justin Tomlinson: As someone who owned a small business for 10 years, I absolutely understand that point. We currently have three successful pilots, concentrating on a small employer offer and matching up those with a disability to the 45% of jobs that are available through SMEs.

Antoinette Sandbach: Britain has an astonishing 30% gap between disabled and non-disabled people in work. What steps are being taken to ensure that disabled people are afforded the same professional opportunities as those without disabilities?

Justin Tomlinson: The Government are committed to halving the disability employment gap. We are ensuring that disabled people have the skills and confidence to enter work through a named coach in universal credit and we are upskilling our Jobcentre Plus staff and our employment support programmes. We also recognise that we need to create opportunities, so we are working with businesses through the Access to Work programme, the Disability Confident campaign, the small employer offer, and our reverse jobs fairs.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I recently attended a celebration at Petroc college in North Devon to thank employers and congratulate the students who took part in the successful supported internship programme, which provides valuable work experience for young people with additional needs. Will the Minister join me in congratulating everyone concerned? Does he agree that such schemes play an important part in the Government’s policy of bringing people with disabilities closer to employment?

Justin Tomlinson: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend because I had the pleasure of meeting the students and staff at Petroc at his own reverse jobs fair, where he took a proactive approach to linking employers with the greater opportunities provided by organisations such as Petroc.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): This has been mentioned previously but it did not get an adequate response. Given that the prominent Brexit campaign called for a bonfire of EU protections for workers, what guarantee can the Minister give that all the current protections extended to disabled people by our membership of the EU will be safe?

Justin Tomlinson: This Government have a proud record on this issue. We spend over £50 billion a year supporting people with disabilities and long-term health conditions—up £2 billion since the previous Parliament—and will continue to work in this area.

Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign

10. Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): What recent representations he has received from the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign; and if he will make a statement. [905759]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Shailesh Vara): The Pensions Minister, Baroness Altmann, and I recently met WASPI representatives to listen to their concerns. We made clear the Government’s position that we will not be unwinding past decisions and that there are no plans to change policy.

Margaret Ferrier: Between 2016-17 and 2025-26, more than 5,000 women in my constituency alone will be affected by the changes. Some of them will need to work six years longer than they had anticipated. For the
last time, I ask the Minister to show some leadership. Rather than shrug his shoulders, will he step up to the mark and end this injustice?

Mr Vara: No one is shrugging shoulders. As I said, no credible alternative has been put forward by any of the parties in this House; it was not in their manifestos. Members do not help the WASPI women by leading them to have expectations when the position of the Government is absolutely clear. A £1.1 billion concession was made in 2011; the period involved was reduced from two years to 18 months; and for 81% of the women affected the period concerned is no more than 12 months—81% of the women will not be affected by more than 12 months.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): A few moments ago, the Secretary of State made a statement saying that Britain’s economy was booming—or words to that effect. [Interruption.] It was as near as dammit. If it is that good, why does he not make sure the WASPI women get the proper pensions, and not this load of crap the Government are chucking out now?

Mr Vara: Let me just correct the hon. Gentleman. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said that the economy was fundamentally strong. As for the other issues, it would have been helpful if the hon. Gentleman had listened to some of the answers I had given earlier, while he was rehearsing his question. If he had listened, he would have appreciated—

Mr Skinner: You are in the Government.

Mr Vara: If he had listened to the questions, he would have found that I said a £1.1 billion concession was made in 2011.

Employment Trends: East Anglia

13. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What recent assessment has he made of job creation and employment trends in East Anglia; and if he will make a statement.

[905762]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): In the east of England, the number of people in employment has increased by nearly 300,000 since 2010, and the employment rate is close to the highest on record.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Is the Minister aware that in my constituency unemployment has come down from 4.3% in 2010 to 1.5% last month, and that only last Friday Mars Food announced a very welcome £23 million investment in its King’s Lynn plant, thus creating more well paid, skilled jobs? Does he agree that in this post-Brexit climate we should all be doing what we can to flag up well paid, skilled jobs? Does he agree that in this post-Brexit climate we should all be doing what we can to flag up well paid, skilled jobs? Does he agree that in this post-Brexit climate we should all be doing what we can to flag up well paid, skilled jobs?

Justin Tomlinson: That is yet another sign of just how fundamentally strong our economy is, which is helping us to deliver record numbers of people in employment.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I did not study geography at university, but the hon. Gentleman’s constituency is a little way away from East Anglia.

Richard Fuller indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: I am in a generous mood. I have known the hon. Gentleman for 30 years, and if he wants to persuade me that Bedford and Kempston is a hop, skip and a jump away from the constituency of the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), he has a taxing task, but let us hear it.

Richard Fuller: I am very grateful for your indulgence, Mr Speaker. As a lifelong watcher of Anglia Television from the heart of Bedford, I can say that we are very proudly members of East Anglia. In Bedford, a small town, we have only small employers—we do not have a large private sector employer. What steps are the Government taking to encourage small businesses to take on young people and others who are unemployed?

Mr Speaker: I would never have done anything like what the hon. Gentleman has just done when I was a Back Bencher.

Justin Tomlinson: As a Government, we recognise that 45% of private sector jobs are created by small businesses, and so such businesses are key to the success of creating new opportunities. This will be very much at the heart of the Green Paper, making sure that they are aware of initiatives, particularly the commitment to have 3 million more apprentices by 2020.

Young Disabled People: Work

17. Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to assist disabled young people into work.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Department for Work and Pensions have received the recommendations from my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) and agree that the requirement to achieve level 1 English and Maths in an apprenticeship is a hurdle for some young people with learning disabilities. Therefore, subject to a candidate demonstrating need, we will look to adjust this requirement to entry level 3 as soon as possible and monitor the impact.

Jo Churchill: Last month, I received a wonderful letter from a 13-year-old constituent, Eleanor, who wrote to me about her 20-year-old brother. Richard has autism and learning difficulties, and struggles to find work with the right support. The news about the educational assistance is therefore very welcome. However, he is met with frustration and discrimination in employment. Eleanor said: “seeing how the public can treat him is terrible and it’s hard on me, him, and the rest of our family. Please help him and people with disabilities to have a fairer life with employment opportunities.” Does the Minister agree that the enormous contribution of disabled employees such as Richard is not yet fully recognised by employers?
Justin Tomlinson: The point about employers is absolutely right. That is why we have worked with Autism Alliance to improve knowledge and awareness across our Jobcentre network. We have specialist teams to assist with access to work, and the small employer offer will specifically match employers with the support and help that is available to create more opportunities for disabled people.

Personal Independence Payment Assessments

18. Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that personal independence payment assessments are undertaken fairly and appropriately.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): Provider performance is measured across a range of service level agreements setting out the Department’s expectations for a quality service. This includes an assessment report quality audit. Contractual remedies are in place if the provider fails to deliver against the service standards.

Rosie Cooper: Given that the Infrastructure and Projects Authority’s rating of the Department’s PIP programme is once again amber/red, meaning that successful delivery of the project is in doubt, with major risks or issues apparent in a number of areas, what urgent action is the Minister taking to ensure that problems with assessment are addressed and that disabled people do not continue to bear the brunt of the Government’s policies?

Justin Tomlinson: We have seen that of those who go through the PIP process, 22.5% of claimants secure the highest rate of benefit, compared with just 16% under disability living allowance. We have a constant evaluation, including working with charities and stakeholders, and currently a claimant can expect to have their assessment process over a median of 13 weeks end to end, which is well within expectations.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State intervene personally in the case of one of my constituents, who suffered a stroke, has severe eyesight problems and is almost completely wheelchair-bound? He was refused PIP and as a result his wife has been refused carer’s allowance. He has not had a reassessment of his disabilities since last year and that is not acceptable.

Justin Tomlinson: The point about employers is absolutely right. That is why we have worked with Autism Alliance to improve knowledge and awareness across our Jobcentre network. We have specialist teams to assist with access to work, and the small employer offer will specifically match employers with the support and help that is available to create more opportunities for disabled people.

Topical Questions

T1. [905773] Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Stephen Crabb): On 6 July I appointed Paul Gray to lead a second independent review of PIP. A call for evidence has been published today, seeking evidence from individuals and organisations to inform the review. The review will consider how effectively further evidence is being used to assist the correct claim decision. It will also look at the speed and effectiveness of information gathering, as well as building on recommendations from the first review. I am today announcing the Department’s intention to conduct an evaluation of PIP, with initial findings to be published by early 2017.

Richard Graham: To help deliver our manifesto commitment of bringing a million people with disabilities into work, will my right hon. Friend consider extending the current exemption from employer national insurance contributions for apprentices both to additional apprentices and to full-time employees with disabilities, so that, like the US, the Netherlands and Ireland, our tax system benefits employers who see the abilities as well as the disabilities of all our constituents?

Stephen Crabb: When it comes to closing the disability employment gap, I am absolutely clear that no options have been left off the table. We want to look at the widest possible range of solutions, including financial incentives such as our small employment offer, which will support small businesses to increase local job opportunities for disabled people.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): In May, after a two-year wait, the Government finally published redacted reports of 49 social security claimants who had died between 2012 and 2014, revealing that 10 of the 49 had died following a sanction, and 40 of the deaths were associated with a suicide or a suspected suicide. Another nine social security claimants...
found that only 6% of the women who were due to make ends meet? The DWP survey in 2012 level of unemployment in the country, how they are to whom have already retired in the mistaken belief that they would be receiving their state pension sooner and who live in a region that continues to have the highest Tyne North) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State explain of employing older jobseekers and share good practice. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Shailesh Vara): My hon. Friend raises a very good point. We are doing a number of things in this area. For example, as well as access to a full Jobcentre Plus offer of personalised support, the Department for Work and Pensions introduced older claimant champions in each of the seven Jobcentre Plus groups to work with work coaches within jobcentres to raise the profile of older workers, highlight the benefit of employing older jobseekers and share good practice.

Mr Vara: The hon. Lady is well aware that a number of benefits are involved here. The DWP survey in 2012 found that only 6% of the women who were due to retire within 10 years were unaware that the state pension age had increased.

T3. [905775] Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): Thanks to the work of this Government, the unemployment rate in Bath is just 1.5%. Does the Minister agree that, as well as providing a steady income, working also provides health benefits, both physical and mental?

T5. [905777] Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State explain to the WASPI women from the north-east, some of whom have already retired in the mistaken belief that they would be receiving their state pension sooner and who live in a region that continues to have the highest level of unemployment in the country, how they are to make ends meet?

Mr Vara: The hon. Lady is well aware that a number of benefits are involved here. The DWP survey in 2012 found that only 6% of the women who were due to retire within 10 years were unaware that the state pension age had increased.

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The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): I fully agree that being in work has many benefits beyond the immediate economic security that it brings. It gives us a sense of value and can greatly benefit our mental and physical wellbeing, which is why this Government are championing the transformative role of work. With more people in work than ever before, we are making sure that the whole of society benefits from our growing economy.

T7. [905779] Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): With an 87% budget cut by the UK Government in the first year of employability services in Scotland, will the Secretary of State tell us precisely what his Government are doing to support people back into work in Scotland? Perhaps he can take this opportunity to congratulate the Scottish Government on the £20 million of extra support that they have been giving to help people back into work when this Government have been letting down the people of Scotland.

Stephen Crabb: I hear the hon. Lady’s point, but it is important not to infer too many causal links between the factors that she is raising, and she needs to be extremely careful in how she describes those cases at the Dispatch Box. I am happy to discuss the matter with her on another occasion.

T2. [905774] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What support is my right hon. Friend’s Department offering to those in later middle age and older who are seeking work?

Stephen Crabb: We absolutely do want to support more people to move into self-employment and to help develop the entrepreneurs of the future. The new enterprise allowance has now successfully supported the start-up of nearly 85,000 new businesses and I look forward to visiting my hon. Friend’s constituency to see some of those businesses in action.

T8. [905780] Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): For obvious reasons, refugee families and children are not usually required to meet past residence requirements when accessing benefits, so why on earth are the Government trying to overturn a recent tribunal decision so as to deny disabled refugees, including children, access to disability living allowance on the grounds of those very residence criteria? Is that not particularly absurd given that many of them will have been resettled here specifically because they have such a disability?

Justin Tomlinson: That is an issue on which we are considering taking legal advice.

T6. [905778] Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): As Paralympians from Cardiff, elsewhere in Wales and across the United Kingdom prepare for the Paralympics in Rio, how can we use the Paralympics to change the perception of disabled people, and what are the Government doing to prepare for that?

Justin Tomlinson: I would like to thank you, Mr Speaker, for hosting the announcement of the tennis Paralympic team for Rio. I pay tribute to Channel 4, which will be showing over 700 hours of the Paralympics, with 75% of the presenters having a disability. This is a fantastic opportunity to showcase people’s abilities, and we are all in for a real treat next Friday, when Channel 4 launches its fantastic video promoting the opportunities offered by the Paralympics.

Mr Speaker: I am extraordinarily grateful to the Minister for giving me my cue. First, let me take this opportunity on behalf of the House warmly to congratulate Gordon Reid on his great success at Wimbledon yesterday. Secondly, I am sure the whole House will want to join me in congratulating most warmly Andy Murray on an outstanding performance in winning his second Wimbledon title and his third grand slam so far.
Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The disabilities Minister just agreed to meet a Member of Parliament and their constituent regarding an issue they were concerned about, so can I try again with the Pensions Minister? Will he meet me and some of the 10,000 women born in the 1950s who are affected by the pension changes? Will he come to Hull to meet some of these people and hear directly from them?

Mr Vara: I have met the leadership of the WASPI campaign, and I have met my own constituents. The hon. Lady has articulated the views of her constituents, as have many other MPs on a regular basis. I know very well all the facts; the issue here is that Members such as her should not be giving expectations to women, when the position has been made absolutely clear at the Dispatch Box: the Government have no intention of changing their policy.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): I thank the disabilities Minister for accepting the recommendations of the review I chaired into learning disability apprenticeships. Will he confirm that he will look into which of those recommendations can now be applied to other hidden impairments, such as hearing loss and sight loss?

Justin Tomlinson: I would like to thank my hon. Friend, as his taskforce concluded its work within a month, and we have now secured agreement from my Department and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to open up in the apprenticeship programme greater opportunities for those with a learning disability. I am sure we will be coming to my hon. Friend to discuss further opportunities.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Government are trialling distributed ledger technology, or blockchain, for the payment and spending of claimants’ benefits. It is a fantastic new technology, but the Government’s own report says that it needs a regulatory, ethical and data framework. How do we know that vulnerable benefits claimants are not being forced to share their data without giving proper informed consent?

Stephen Crabb: I thank the hon. Lady for that very interesting question. This technology is very new, and I confess that I am not an expert on it—the person who is is my noble Friend Lord Freud, who is, of course, in the other place. When it comes to security of claimants’ data, we are absolutely committed to the very highest standards of protection. However, in terms of the wider technology issue the hon. Lady refers to, I look forward to discussing it with her in more detail.

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): Currently, children under three are not eligible for Motability benefits. However, during my time in children’s hospices, I saw first hand how critical transport is for children with life-limiting illnesses, particularly given all the equipment they need. Will my hon. Friend agree to look at the issue again to see whether these young people can get the support they need?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend has been campaigning on this issue for some time, using his first-hand experience. We are acutely aware of the issue, and I would be happy to meet him to discuss further opportunities.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I do not want to upset anybody on the Labour Front Bench by showing passion and anger about the Government’s failure to tackle unscrupulous employers who give no guarantee of employment, no contract, no certainty and no pension—nothing but zero-hours contracts, with people being hired from agencies—but when will the Government take on these rotten employers?

Stephen Crabb: Zero-hours contracts, of course, form only a very small proportion of the overall jobs in the labour market. The thing that is particularly pernicious about zero-hours contracts is the exclusivity clauses—that has been recognised as widespread—and we are the Government who actually took action to deal with that.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): In my constituency we have an initiative with the DWP and the Salvation Army food bank whereby when people come into the food bank, the DWP helps them in any way it can by placing an officer there. Would my right hon. Friend like to come to Morecambe to see at first hand how this initiative is working out?

Stephen Crabb: Yes, I would like to go to Morecambe to see that project. I am very clear that something we need to be doing far better, and more of, through our job centres at a local level is integrating with local services, whether they are provided through the Salvation Army or any other charity.
Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to make a statement on whether the Government will seek parliamentary approval before triggering article 50.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): The question of how to invoke parliamentary discussion around triggering article 50 has two distinct facets, one legal and the other democratic. Taking the legal considerations first, I am sure that everyone will be aware of the debate about whether invoking article 50 can be done through the royal prerogative, which would not legally require parliamentary approval, or would require an Act of Parliament because it leads ultimately to repeal or amendment of the European Communities Act 1972. I will leave the lawyers to their doubtless very enjoyable and highly paid disputes. Apart from observing that there are court cases already planned or under way on this issue, so the judges may reach a different view, I simply remark that Government lawyers believe that it is a royal prerogative issue.

Nevertheless, I hope that everyone here will agree that democratic principles should out rank legal formalities. The Prime Minister has already said that Parliament will have a role, and it is clearly right that a decision as momentous as this one must be fully debated and discussed in Parliament. Clearly, the precise format and timing of those debates and discussions will need to be agreed through the usual channels. As everyone will understand, I cannot offer any more details today because those discussions have not yet happened. However, I will venture this modest prediction: I strongly doubt that they will be confined to a single debate or a single occasion. There will be many important issues about the timing and the substance of different facets of the negotiations that the Government, the Opposition, the Backbench Business Committee, and I dare say, perhaps even you, Mr Speaker, will feel it is important to discuss, but on the details of which topics, on what dates, and the specific wording of the motions, we shall have to wait and see.

Helen Goodman: I thank the Minister for that reply. If the royal prerogative is used to trigger article 50, would that not be a clear breach of the promises made to the public by the Brexiers during the referendum campaign that they would “take back control” and “restore parliamentary sovereignty”? How could it be right to initiate negotiations with important and far-reaching significance for citizenship rights, immigration rules, employment and social rights, agriculture, trading relations with the EU and third countries, and Scotland and Northern Ireland, without seeking Parliament’s approval for the aims, objectives and red lines?

The issues at stake are the culmination of 40 years of legislation. Is it not extraordinary to suggest that changes to these areas should not now come back to this House? The priorities and trade-offs are extremely important to everyone living in the UK. Surely the Minister is not suggesting that they should be decided behind closed doors in Whitehall while Parliament is presented with a done deal. Is not his inability to say how Brexit will be negotiated a clear indication of the Government’s failure to do any contingency planning? Why is the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster wasting taxpayers’ money fighting a court case to keep the Government’s approach to Brexit secret? We know that the Minister cannot say today what the red lines will be, but why cannot he at least be clear that Parliament’s approval will be sought before the negotiations begin? When will he be able to say what the process will be? He says that these are matters for a new Government. Has the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) been consulted, and can the Minister tell the House when we will have a new Government?

John Penrose: Mr Speaker—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: A considerable burden has been placed by the hon. Lady on Minister Penrose’s shoulders. It is a burden that he seems to bear stoically and with fortitude, but it would be good if we could actually hear his response.

John Penrose: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I shall try to bear up under the pressure. First, I gently say to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) that it is difficult to argue that the Government’s approach is secret if it is in court. It is not a secret court; it will all be argued out in public. I have just said that the issues will be revealed as we go forward with the new Prime Minister. The point on which I hope I can reassure the hon. Lady is very straightforward: my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May)—it looks like she is going to be the new Prime Minister—has been very clear in saying that Brexit means Brexit. What that means is that the destination to which we are travelling is not in doubt. The means used to get there will have to be explained, but I think it only fair to wait until she is Prime Minister and has a chance to lay out her programme, the process and, therefore, when Parliament will have a chance to discuss and debate the issues. At that point I am sure that all will be revealed.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the way to take back control and seek parliamentary approval is to proceed quickly to repeal the European Communities Act 1972 while transferring all European law relevant to the single market into British law and at the same time protecting our borders and keeping our contributions? That is what we voted for. Will the new Government deliver that promptly?

John Penrose: As I just said, the important thing—I hope this reassures my right hon. Friend—is that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead has been clear that Brexit means Brexit. That means that the destination, on which he and I both agree, is not in doubt. There are questions on how we get there, precisely how to run the negotiations and the precise timing of what gets addressed and when, and I hope that both he and I will allow our soon-to-be-installed new Prime Minister time to lay that out. I am sure that she will do so at the first opportunity.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question and my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) for asking it.
The outcome of the EU referendum represents the most momentous constitutional change that our country has faced in the post-war era. Now is the time to take a considered view on the future of the negotiations and for the new Government to lay out the timetable, including when they anticipate that article 50 will be triggered. It should not be triggered, however, until there is a clear plan in place about what the UK will be negotiating for and how it will be achieved.

The Government have already indicated that they will consult the devolved Administrations and the Mayor of London, and they must do the same with Her Majesty’s official Opposition. That is the only way we can develop a consensus about what the country’s negotiating plan should be, and that should be put to a vote in this House.

The priority must be to ensure that the Government’s negotiating team, undertaking the most substantial set of negotiations on our behalf in modern history, are fully equipped, fully resourced and fully prepared to extract the best deal possible for Britain in the Brexit negotiations. There are 170 trade agreements that now need to be renegotiated, but it is suggested that only 20 people across the whole of Whitehall have the requisite experience to negotiate.

We have deep concerns that the autumn statement, which outlined drastic cuts for Whitehall long before Brexit materialised as a realistic possibility, is no longer fit for purpose. That is why Labour is saying to the Government that, while discussions about article 50 are vital, it is clear that what comes next matters even more. It would be an abdication of responsibility if our civil service negotiating team does not have the resources it needs and is instead forced to spend vital time implementing brutal budget cuts at home when it should be batting for Britain abroad. Let us properly resource our civil service and together develop a consensus for the future of Britain.

John Penrose: I am pleased to hear the hon. Lady say that there is an opportunity for cross-party consensus. It will be much more powerful for this country in any negotiations that it undertakes, not only with other EU member states, but with other countries around the world, if they know that the political parties and the people of Britain are speaking with one voice and that we are anxious to be an outward-looking, international country that is aiming to establish new links around the world. I welcome the hon. Lady’s comments on that.

I also agree with the hon. Lady that it is important that we have a clear timetable as soon as our new Prime Minister is in place, if only because—she is right to point this out—the details of the timetable have to be geared to maximising our negotiating leverage. We know where we are going: the question is how we get there. Clearly, the order of play—the order in which issues are addressed—and the timing have to be planned out incredibly carefully, to make sure, as she said, that we get the best deal possible.

The final point on which I agree with the hon. Lady. Lady say that about devolved Government. She is absolutely right to say that we need to make sure that the devolved Administrations are involved as well, so that this is not merely a question of cross-party consensus in Westminster. It has to be a question of consensus, as far as it is possible to achieve it, right across the UK.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): The Prime Minister originally said that he would trigger article 50 immediately, so presumably he felt that he had the full legal authority to do so. My hon. Friend suggested that those who want to have a vote before article 50 is triggered are concerned not with parliamentary sovereignty but at making a clear attempt to thwart the democratic will of the British people. Does he agree that they must be completely resisted by any real democrat? The referendum was not a consultation with the British people; it was an instruction from the British people that we have a duty to obey.

John Penrose: I strongly agree with my right hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour that the question here is not about the legal power, which clearly, as the Prime Minister has previously mentioned, is available. The question is: what is politically and democratically right to reflect the decision that has been made in the referendum? Therefore, although the Prime Minister is, very sensibly, saying that the timing and method of triggering article 50 needs to be a decision taken by his successor—we now know who that will be—his successor is also right to say very clearly that the British people have spoken and that Brexit means Brexit.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): We are grateful to the Minister for confirming that this will be done through royal prerogative. Given the events of today, perhaps that is the way we could determine the leadership of the Conservative party. However, I remind the Minister of the soon to be departed Prime Minister’s remarks that the Scottish Government will be fully consulted on any Brexit proposals. Can the Minister therefore confirm that, before any process is started on article 50, the Scottish Government will be fully consulted and able to give their consent for any move forward? I also remind the Minister that Scotland did not vote for this Tory-inspired Brexit, and for us it is the Scottish people who are sovereign. We have yet to hear any Minister say that they respect the Scottish result and are prepared to make sure that the Scottish people also secure what they voted for. For this Government, the Scottish Government might be charged with taking the UK out of the EU, but those of us on the SNP Benches are charged with ensuring that the Scottish people always get what they voted for too.

John Penrose: I am delighted to confirm that the Scottish Government will be involved. In fact, I believe that some early discussions are already under way. I hope and expect that those will continue, as they will with the other devolved Governments. I would, however, gently remind the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman that this is a commitment to consult, which is not quite the same thing as seeking an outright consent. As his own party has accepted very recently, this is not a devolved issue and is to be dealt with by this Parliament and the UK as a whole. It is a decision that we have taken as a country collectively.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for that last clarification. We may be seeking consent, but it will almost certainly not be forthcoming from those on the Scottish National Benches. Will the Minister confirm that there is no escape from doing this via article 50, to which we are bound by treaty, and whatever other parliamentary processes then come
behind it? We have to meet our treaty obligations through invoking article 50, which is the instruction of the British people. Will he ensure that that is put in place as soon as we have our negotiating hand in place?

John Penrose: I agree with my hon. Friend on both those points: consensus is always desirable and to be sought wherever possible, and article 50 is the route for achieving Brexit. He is also right to point out that it is only the tip of a much larger iceberg; there are a whole series of other things that have to wrap around it. We have heard some of those mentioned already during this urgent question, and I suspect that we will hear more of them in due course.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Is it not the case that referendums are advisory and that this Parliament is sovereign? Is it not a constitutional outrage and supreme irony that those on the Conservative Benches who based their argument for Brexit on parliamentary sovereignty now want to deny this House a vote and are suggesting that an unelected Prime Minister, with no mandate, agrees to such a fundamental decision for this country? That is a disgrace, and they must not be allowed to get away with it.

John Penrose: With the greatest possible respect to the right hon. Gentleman, who is extremely experienced, he may be right on strict constitutional legalities but democratically he is fundamentally wrong. We have had a referendum, the people have spoken and it would be unconscionable—if it would be impossible—for us collectively to turn around and thumb our noses at the British people and ignore that democratic verdict.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I point out that it would be extremely odd, for the first time in this Parliament’s history, to start taking instructions on how to conduct our decision making from the administrative court, as seems to be implied by the case before it? Were legislative consent actually required for the exercise of article 50, that legislative consent was effectively given when we passed the European Union Referendum Act 2015, which established the referendum and put the question before the British people.

John Penrose: I will endeavour to tread carefully because, as I have mentioned, there are cases either in train or planned. I think that the fundamental political and democratic point must be this: the people have spoken, and whichever side of the argument Members of this House or those out in the rest of the country were on, it is now up to all of us to come together, to unite as a country and to make sure that we respect the democratic decision and the democratic will that have been clearly expressed.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Minister is an honest man, and therefore when he says, “Brexit means Brexit”, he knows that there are as many versions of Brexit as there are Members on the Government Benches. He needs to reaffirm parliamentary sovereignty and ensure that Parliament can vote on the Government’s negotiating stance, for instance on the vexed and dangerous question of what happens at the Irish border.

John Penrose: As I said in my opening response to the urgent question, I am sure that there will be many opportunities, on many different occasions, for Members in this Chamber to discuss and debate all sorts of different issues, including the one that the right hon. Gentleman has just mentioned and many others. This negotiation will be an ongoing process, not a single event, and therefore he is absolutely right that there will be many opportunities where specific issues will become salient, where people in this Chamber will have very strong views and where people in devolved Governments will have very strong views. Those views need to be heard and aired throughout the process.

Sir Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is just the slightest chance that over the next few weeks we may be able of generating more heat than light on this subject? It is not Parliament that will be negotiating with the European Union as we come out of it: it is the Government. Will he ask our right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to ensure that, while Parliament must be kept informed and may express its view, it will be for Ministers and for the Prime Minister, essentially, to carry out these negotiations once article 50 has been triggered? Parliament should not hamper the negotiating stance—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hamper?”] I think somebody wants their lunch. Parliament should not constrain the negotiating tactics of any Minister.

John Penrose: My right hon. and learned Friend gets the parliamentary award for optimism for saying that there is only the “slightest chance” that we might generate more heat than light on the matter over the next few weeks. He is absolutely right to say that this is something that Ministers need to take forward but, as I said earlier, I am absolutely certain that the Government, the Opposition, the Backbench Business Committee and others will take many different opportunities to make sure that Parliament’s views are forcefully expressed and the issues are debated as we go.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): The Minister will know that the triggering of article 50 will have profound consequences for the 3 million EU citizens who are living in the United Kingdom. Has the Minister for Europe, who is sitting next to him on the Treasury Bench, had any representations from other EU countries about the position of their nationals here? If not, will we be able to have clarity on whether they have the right to remain? At the moment, Ministers are saying different things about these rights, and we need that certainty before any triggering of article 50.

John Penrose: The point, of course, is that there will be ongoing discussions about this and many other issues. The question of when those discussions might bear fruit, particularly given the fact that there have been some concerns about informal negotiations being inappropriate, is something that will have to be resolved.

At this stage, I give the right hon. Gentleman the same reply that I have given to others: we must ensure that we have a programme, which will be laid out by the new Prime Minister as soon as she is in place. I hope she will be able to give him more detail and clarity on that point as well as many others that will be involved in the negotiations.
Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): In terms of the doctrine of the sovereignty of Parliament, is it not true that that sovereignty is delegated by the British people, not given to us by divine right? It is absurd to think of the sovereignty of Parliament as being by divine right as it is the divine right of kings. The British people have spoken and given us a mandate, and that mandate must be fulfilled, but the details of that mandate will no doubt be implemented by legislation.

John Penrose: I defer to my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour on the legality of where sovereignty begins and ends, and where it is delegated from and to. The fundamental point that is clear from his remarks—and, I hope, from my previous remarks—is that the people have spoken, we are now honour bound to deliver on that democratic decision, and we should not try to resile or step back from it in any way.

Mr Speaker: I expect that the Minister also defers to his hon. Friend on the matter of knowledge of kings.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Will the Minister consider the proposal put forward today by 1,000 lawyers of establishing of a royal commission or independent body to receive evidence from a wide range of groups, particularly about the risks and benefits of triggering article 50 at various times? Will he ensure that such a body will be able to report before Parliament votes?

John Penrose: I think that I am not being over-cynical if I wonder whether a proposal by 1,000 lawyers for a commission to deliberate at length might be a delaying tactic. The concern will be not to tie the hands of the incoming Prime Minister or her negotiating team in how we approach this matter. As the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) rightly pointed out, we must ensure that whatever we do and however we handle this, we aim to get the best deal possible for this country with not just other European member states, but other countries in the world.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): Quite a bit of controversy is already breaking out and we have scarcely started this debate. The Minister has been doing a great job with his outpouring of common sense on a heap of these questions. Will he confirm that all common sense points to not triggering article 50 until it is in the UK’s national interest to do so, as the Treasury Committee has reported, and as the Governor of the Bank of England and many people who have been closely involved with these issues have concluded?

John Penrose: I am happy to confirm that this is not a question of “if” we leave the EU but “how”, so the calculation that we—particularly the new Prime Minister and her team—need to make is about the best way to structure and time negotiations to maximise our leverage. I am sure that the incoming Prime Minister will have read the Committee’s report with great care, as have we all, and will take those factors into consideration.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): At the beginning of his first answer, the Minister said that this was not just a legal matter, but a political matter, so I cannot understand for the life of me why the Government are challenging the legal case. Surely sending in lawyers is just a complete waste of money—whether it is 10 lawyers or 1,000, it does not matter. Why are the Government wasting money on trying to assert that this is just a matter of royal prerogative, rather than accepting the political fact that while, yes, Brexit is Brexit—that may be the case—the Minister is far more likely to get a good deal from other European countries if he has managed to bind both sides of this House and both Houses of Parliament into a strong negotiating position?

John Penrose: I had thought, and hoped, that the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley was speaking for more Labour Members and that we would be able to achieve a degree of cross-party consensus. It would be helpful to have country-wide unanimity on this issue, so I am sad that there does not seem to be such unanimity on the Opposition Benches. The Attorney General, who is sitting next to me, is convinced that the Government’s case is strongly arguable, and that is why we are taking this case to court.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): We are in the strange situation that last week the result of the referendum was so catastrophic for Labour that its Members passed a motion of no confidence in their leader, but today that result is neither here nor there, as we can just proceed and keep ourselves in the EU because of parliamentary democracy. Perhaps Labour Members will make their minds up soon. Does not what we have heard today emphasise the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox)—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear the hon. Gentleman—[Interruption.]. Order. I do not care whether other people do; we are going to hear the hon. Gentleman. It is as simple as that. I do not care how long it takes.

Philip Davies: Does not what we have heard today show that what my right hon. Friend said was true and that the purpose of these devices is not to help the Government to implement the will of the public, but to ask for the right to try to prevent it from being implemented? If the Government do not implement it because Labour frustrates the process, Labour will be wiped out in the north of England in a future general election. Labour Members might be hellbent on self-destruction, but may I ask the Minister to save the Labour party and implement Brexit in full?

John Penrose: There are many reasons to implement Brexit in full, but that is the first time anyone has urged me to do it to save the Labour party. I am particularly delighted to hear that coming from my hon. Friend. I agree that there will be a nagging concern in some people’s minds—unworthy though it might be—that some of these proposals to delay the decision or subject it to intricate parliamentary procedures might be aimed at frustrating the democratically expressed will of the people, which of course would be democratically entirely wrong.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): I supported remain—I have no regrets and make no apology—but is it not absolutely essential that the majority decision, taken rightly or wrongly, is respected, because otherwise it makes a complete mockery of democracy?
John Penrose: That was beautifully and eloquently expressed. We are all, I hope, democrats first and foremost, and whichever side of the referendum debate we were on, we in this House and those more broadly across the country have to respect the democratically expressed will of the British people.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am glad to see the Attorney General in his place on the Treasury Bench. Does the Minister agree with these propositions put forward by Sir Paul Jenkins, QC, the former head of the Government Legal Service, and many others: first, that article 50 is the only lawful route for exiting the EU; secondly, that that is a matter for the royal prerogative; and, thirdly, that the European Union Referendum Act 2015 is not, of itself, adequate in law to constitute notice under article 50? Finally, does he agree that to repeal unilaterally the European Communities Act 1972 other than through the article 50 process would be a breach of a treaty obligation, which is something that no Government have committed in 300 years and would be wholly unconscionable?

John Penrose: My hon. Friend asks four questions, and the answer to the first three is a straightforward yes. The only gloss I would add to his fourth question about how we might either amend or repeal not just the European Communities Act, but any other measures that need to be amended as a result of Brexit, is that that will inevitably require primary legislation, which of course will be brought forward when the time is right.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): The Minister referred to discussions with the devolved regions. Will he outline what discussions have taken place with the Northern Ireland Executive, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish Government, given issues around the need there for free movement of goods, services and people, the loss of which would be detrimental to the whole economy of the island of Ireland?

John Penrose: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. These are extremely ticklish and difficult discussions. I can confirm that discussions have begun, but I cannot, I am afraid, go into huge detail about how far they have got or what the future plans are. If she has any concerns or doubts about how those discussions might be progressing, I would encourage her to talk to me or the Northern Ireland Office because I am sure that we could set her mind at rest.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be positively contumacious of the clearly expressed will of the British people were the Government to refuse to trigger article 50? What does he feel would be the response of the British people at the next general election to anyone who encouraged showing such contempt for their views?

John Penrose: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point: it is essential for the health of democracy, as much as for the future direction of this country, that voters understand and believe that we here hold their opinions in high regard and feel morally bound to deliver on them. If we ignore their democratically expressed consent, we will face a much bigger problem than at present, because that would undermine the very foundations of the democratic consent that underpins this place. I cannot think of a more dangerous route for us to go down.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Is not the situation a bit more than ticklish? This is the biggest constitutional change for our country for half a century. Last week, Chilcot criticised the legal processes that led to the Iraq war, criticised the way in which prerogative power worked in the run-up to that war and, most importantly, criticised the fact that there was not a sufficient plan for after the invasion had been completed. On that basis, is the Minister really saying that we should not come back to Parliament so that individual Members can reach a view on whether we should trigger article 50?

John Penrose: I would draw a distinction in my reply between “whether” and “how”. We have been very clear, as has my right hon. Friend, that the destination is not in doubt: Brexit means Brexit, as I have said several times already. How we get there, however, is a matter for discussion. It is a matter for my right hon. Friend to lay out and I am sure that, once she is behind the door of No. 10, she will do so. At that stage, I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will have more detail about how those discussions and announcements might be made.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Switzerland had a referendum that showed it was determined to cap immigration, but because of protracted negotiations with the EU, the EU decided to start retaliatory measures, including the country’s removal from the Erasmus scheme. How long, therefore, does the Minister think we have after activating article 50 before the EU starts retaliatory measures on us?

John Penrose: My hon. Friend asks an extremely pertinent question. That will be one of the matters that the incoming Prime Minister and her negotiating team will factor into their decisions about the timing and order of play of the negotiations. I am afraid that I cannot offer my hon. Friend much more than that now, but the point he raises must be an important case study that will be front and centre of people’s consideration as the decisions are made.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): The majority of my constituents still feel very angry. They feel that they were misinformed—that is putting it mildly—and therefore think that they need to know the facts. One of the facts pointed out to the Foreign Affairs Committee was that the Foreign Office will need to be doubled in size. Given that the autumn statement said that there would be drastic cuts in Whitehall, should we not have a new autumn statement to spell out the implications of Brexit to the British people?

John Penrose: It is clear that many things will change in the new world that we now face. The country’s trade orientation, foreign policy and so forth will all have to be readressed and amended, just as many of our businesses will have to reassess how they do business. The right hon. Lady is absolutely right that some consequential changes might be needed, but I say again that I cannot prefigure anything that the incoming
Prime Minister may be considering. Like me, the right hon. Lady will have to wait until announcements are made. I will take what she said as a potential submission to the new prime ministerial team, and perhaps it will consider her remarks in that light.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): The Opposition spokesman talked about 170 free trade agreements that will need to be renegotiated, but my understanding is that there are about 167 independently recognised countries outside the EU. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) suggested that the Government might be something other than inclusive when discussing Brexit, yet about 34 million participants to date have given us a clear message. Does my hon. Friend agree that rather than spending our time on whether we invoke article 50 and whether we adhere to the mandate of the people, we should focus our efforts on securing a looser, collaborative relationship with our European neighbours and grabbing the opportunities from the rest of the world?

John Penrose: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—the focus now must be on how we get this done in the best and most constructive way possible for our nation. There will be opportunities and great new horizons as a result of the decision. We need to make sure we are clear about them and that we are set up in the right way to grab those opportunities as they present themselves.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): As things stand, Britain will have two years to withdraw from the European Union once it invokes article 50, but most analysts say that it will take much longer than two years for Britain successfully to extricate itself and have a new relationship. Have the Government therefore considered approaching member states about a possible extension to that period?

John Penrose: As I understand it, I think that any alteration to the article 50 process requires unanimity from other EU member states, which represents a pretty high bar for any Government. I am sure that that factor will be considered by the incoming Prime Minister and her negotiating team. I am also sure that they will want to consider many other options to maximise our negotiating leverage. As I have said, the hon. Gentleman and I will have to wait until the new Prime Minister is ready to announce precisely how she and her team wish to approach these issues.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The referendum has been a deeply divisive process that has divided city against town, community against community and nation against nation. Does the Minister agree that we now need a cross-party approach to deal with when we invoke article 50 and the basic negotiating position around that, and how we hold the negotiating team to account? Will he consider setting up a special parliamentary Committee to do both those jobs?

John Penrose: The current Prime Minister has said that he believes it is very important not just for the UK Government to contribute, but for the devolved Governments—and, wherever possible, other parties on a cross-party basis—to contribute so that we can, whenever possible, speak as a nation with one voice. The hon. Gentleman is right to say the referendum was a pretty divisive affair. It is not just political parties that need to knit together again; society needs to knit together again. I am not sure that I would necessarily share the hon. Gentleman’s enthusiasm for a parliamentary Committee as the solution to achieve that, but I share his conviction that a degree of healing is required, and that all of us on both sides of the House have a duty to ensure that our respective parties and the communities that we represent are able to come together for the good of the country.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): More than 60% of my electorate voted to leave the European Union and I very much honour and respect their views. It is clear that the triggering of article 50 is unchartered waters for both this Government and the EU, so would it not make sense for the Government to be in open negotiation with their European counterparts to set out the parameters, process and areas of commonality, and then to come back to the House to announce the likely procedure so that we ensure that we have the very best deal for the people of Denton and Reddish and of the United Kingdom as we take forward the referendum result into reality?

John Penrose: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that article 50 is uncharted waters. No one has done this before and we are, of necessity, having to address brand-new problems. I will take the rest of his remarks as a submission to the incoming Prime Minister and her negotiating team. He is absolutely right that whatever decisions they make, and whatever process and timetable they lay out, those will have to be founded on one central principle that I hope we can all sign up to: we need to maximise the negotiating position and negotiating strength of this country as a whole to get the best deal possible.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Minister cannot say what “Brexit means Brexit” really means, so is it not vital that, given we have no idea what the terms of exit will be, this is properly scrutinised and voted on by democratically elected Members of this House?

John Penrose: I think I addressed that in my initial remarks, but I am sure that there will be plenty of opportunities over a long period for Parliament to discuss many facets of the negotiations, and that the hon. Lady and many others will have a chance to make their views known. As for any decisions that might be made, I, like everyone else, will have to wait for the new Prime Minister to lay out her programme and timetable. I am sure that all will be clear at that point, and that we shall be able to address any decision points that may be offered.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Most of my constituents in both Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan voted to remain. Although they are concerned about the result, they would be even more concerned to think that Parliament would have anything less than a full say in this process, not least because many Executive and legislative competences are also devolved to the National Assembly. Will the Minister explain what specific role he expects Welsh Government Ministers and the Assembly itself to have in deciding the final proposal that is put before us?
John Penrose: As I said earlier to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and, I think, to the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), discussions are already under way. We are endeavouring to involve everyone and to seek consensus whenever possible but, ultimately, foreign policy is reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament. While we want to ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute, and that, as far as possible, there is a collective view so that we understand what are the best opportunities for the constituent parts of the United Kingdom, at the end of the day the matter must come back to the United Kingdom Government and Parliament.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Brexit means Brexit, but there is no agreed definition of what “Brexit” means, apart from the fact that it involves parliamentary sovereignty. Is the Minister seriously proposing that we should undergo such a momentous seismic change as Brexit without its having been defined to the British people before the referendum, or decided on by Parliament after it?

John Penrose: The hon. Lady is right: the details will become a great deal clearer as the negotiation goes through. We will all discover more about the various facets of how Brexit will affect different parts of our lives as the negotiations near completion. However, I must repeat what I have said several times already: we shall not be able to say how Parliament will engage with that until the new Prime Minister has had a chance to lay out her timetable for the negotiations, whereupon it will be possible to assess when opportunities for debate and discussion will occur.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): This was not the question that I was going to ask, but given the Minister’s response to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), I want to press him on the extent to which devolved institutions will be consulted. Much of the work of some Departments is devolved—food and farming, for example—yet in terms of the European Union, this will be a UK Government negotiating position, and that really does need to be resolved.

John Penrose: The hon. Lady gives a good illustration of instances in which it will be important to ensure that the constituent parts of the United Kingdom are closely involved so that their views can be factored in, whether the issue in question is devolved or non-devolved. There will be plenty of occasions when views will need to be fed back very carefully to inform the discussions and the negotiating team that is undertaking them.

Safety of Prison Staff

4.13 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State if he will make a statement on the safety of staff in prisons.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Michael Gove): A central duty of the Ministry of Justice is security on our prison estate. It is imperative that the dedicated professionals who work in our prisons are kept safe. It is also critical that we safeguard the welfare of those who are in custody. It is therefore of profound concern to me that serious assaults against staff in prisons have been on the rise recently. In the 12 months to December 2015, there were 625 incidents, an increase of 31%.

Those who work in our prisons are idealistic public servants, who run the risk of assault and abuse every day but continue in their jobs because they are driven by a noble cause: they want to reform and rehabilitate offenders. That is why we must stand behind them. I know that members of the Prison Officers Association, and other trade unions, want rapid action to be taken to make their work safer; I understand their frustrations, and I am determined to help.

Violence in prisons has increased over recent years for a number of reasons. The nature of the offenders currently in custody is one factor: younger offenders who have been involved in gang-related activities pose a particular concern. Another factor is the widespread availability of new psychoactive substances or NPS—synthetically manufactured drugs which are more difficult to detect than traditional cannabis and opiates. The former chief inspector of prisons has said that NPS are “now the most serious threat to the safety and security of jails.” NPS consumption, and indeed violence in prison, are also often a consequence of prisoners’ boredom and frustration, and a lack of faith in the future.

There is no single solution to the problem we face, but we are taking steps to reform our prisons. To take account of our changing prison population, more than 2,800 new prison officers have been recruited since January 2015, a net increase of 530. To keep them safer, we are deploying body-worn cameras as additional protection for staff. In May, we outlawed new psychoactive substances and thus dramatically reduced the opportunities for easy profits to be made from their trade. In June, I allocated an extra £10 million in new funding for prison safety, and the money has gone direct to governors.

All these steps will, I believe, help improve safety, but there are two more critical points to make. First, I want to stress that my Department’s door will be open to staff and their representatives to ensure we work collaboratively to improve conditions for all in our prisons. Secondly, it is because I have seen for myself how important it is to change our prisons for the better that this Government have initiated a major reform programme. We will be replacing ageing and ineffective prisons with new establishments designed to foster rehabilitation. We will give governors greater scope to design regimes that encourage purposeful activity. We will ensure that prisoners are more effectively incentivised to turn their lives around. As we press ahead with this reform programme, I am confident we can ensure that our prisons can become what they should always be: safe and secure places of redemption and rehabilitation.
Andy Slaughter: The situation on our prison estate continues to deteriorate, as the Secretary of State concedes, and I am sorry we have heard nothing from him today that we have not heard before.

Over the weekend, prison staff held crisis meetings across the country amid concerns about their security and safety in the workplace. Incidents of violence and disorder are reported on a daily basis. On Friday around 100 staff at HMP Liverpool met outside their prison at the start of their shift, a pattern that was repeated at many other prisons. A Ministry of Justice spokesman unhelpfully called the action “unlawful” despite admitting that it posed no security risk. I wonder whether the Secretary of State thinks that is an appropriate response to members of staff concerned about their welfare and that of the inmates. According to local staff at Liverpool prison, over the past 12 months there have been more assaults than in the previous 12 years. This includes one member of staff who was stabbed, while others have been spat at, punched and kicked and had urine and faeces thrown over them. On the same day, a squad of specialist prison service riot officers was sent into HMP Birmingham, and in a separate incident in the same prison on the same day a prisoner was found dead in his cell in unexplained circumstances. A Prison Officers Association spokesman said that between 5,000 and 6,000 prison officers had taken part in the pre-shift meetings, with the numbers showing the “strength of feeling” of its members.

The Secretary of State will also be aware that a freedom of information request last week revealed there had been five walkouts in the past five months, including from Wormwood Scrubs in my constituency. Following that walkout in May, and the serious assault on two officers and an urgent question here, the Secretary of State announced £10 million, but, frankly, he has been absent in the last few weeks and we have had an inadequate and reactive response to each crisis.

We need a full response to a growing and increasing crisis and, as the Secretary of State correctly says, a growing number of serious assaults. I hope if we do not hear it today, we will hear that full strategy, and hear it soon, for the safety of our prison officers and prisoners. If we do not have that, he is going to lose control fully of the prison estate.

Michael Gove: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman for the detail and tone of his remarks. He continues now on the Back Benches the great work he did on the Front Bench, making sure that the condition of our prisons is kept at the forefront of our minds.

May I first say that in the limited time I had available in response to his original urgent question, I was not able to outline all the steps being taken? Thanks, of course, to his diligent work and that of the Justice Committee, a number of areas of concern have been brought to our attention or highlighted or underlined.

We have appointed a highly experienced prison governor, Claudia Sturt, formerly governor of Belmarsh, to lead work specifically to ensure that our prisons are more secure. She has set up a taskforce to visit the prisons that face the greatest challenge. Those visits have so far resulted in prison governors feeling reassured and strengthened that they have the best professional advice to help them deal with these problems. In addition, we have been rolling out something called the five-minute intervention, which is a specific intervention to help prison officers to de-escalate violent incidents. It is being pioneered by a first-rate professional, Russ Trent, who is due to be the governor of HMP Berwyn, the new prison in Wales.

The hon. Gentleman made the point that £10 million was only a start, and it is indeed only a start. I stress that the Treasury has given us £1.3 billion as part of a broad prison reform programme, but I shall not run away from the fact that we have a difficult situation in our prisons. That is one of the reasons that I invited the BBC in to visit our prisons in recent weeks. It is also one of the reasons that I have sought to work across the aisle to ensure that we tackle this problem fairly. I know that the hon. Gentleman is sincere and dedicated in his desire to ensure that our prisons work better, and I look forward to working with him to that end.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Secretary of State’s full and prompt response to our Select Committee report on prison safety published in May does great credit to his personal commitment to tackling this issue, and I am grateful for his frankness on the level of the challenge that we face. Will he update us on whether he is now able to take on board some of the report’s recommendations? For example, will the Ministry of Justice and the National Offender Management Service now produce a joint action plan to tackle the underlying causes of violence? Will he also address the issues of staff recruitment and retention, and will he agree to produce a quarterly report to the House so that we can measure progress on the action plan against clear, specific targets?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the Chairman of the Select Committee for making those points. The report was exemplary, and, as I mentioned earlier, it has been a great help to the Ministry. I absolutely agree that we will bring forward an action plan and provide the House with regular updates on the steps that we are taking. He is also right to point out that the recruitment and retention of staff are critical. In response to his questions and those of the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), I want to underline the fact that I want to work with the Prison Officers Association and all trade unions to ensure that legitimate concerns—all concerns, indeed—are addressed. I also want to ensure that we continue to attract high-quality people to the Prison Service, because it is a vital job.

Richard Burgen (Leeds East) (Lab): The situation in our underfunded prisons is deteriorating. There have been consequences of the Government’s decision to cut £900 million from the Ministry of Justice budget. Assaults on staff and on prisoners are up. There are 13,000 fewer prison staff than there were in 2010, but there are more prisoners. The Government have made prisons less safe for staff and for prisoners. It is a service in crisis. On Friday, members of the Prison Officers Association held meetings outside prisons across the country to discuss what they call the “perpetual crisis” in the Prison Service. The Secretary of State has accepted that there are “significant problems”. The chief inspector has said prisons are “a lot more dangerous” and that staff shortages have had an impact. The Justice Committee has demanded an “action plan”. In the light of all this, will the Secretary of State tell us whether he or the
National Offender Management Service have spoken to
the Prison Officers Association since Friday’s meetings
outside the prisons?

What is the Secretary of State’s plan to reduce staff
assaults, which have increased by 36% in the past year?
On the £10 million that he has allocated to staff safety,
if he finds, as I suspect he will, that the significantly
higher spending he has experimentally allocated to Bristol,
Hewell and Rochester does indeed have a much greater
impact, will he increase safety spending elsewhere?
In relation to the prisons identified for greater operational
freedom in the upcoming prison and courts reform
Bill—a process the Secretary of State has likened to
school academisation—will he confirm that we will not
see any watering down of staff terms and conditions or
creeping privatisation? Is it not time that this Government
stopped failing prison staff, failing prisons and failing
our society in this regard?

Michael Gove: First, I welcome the hon. Gentleman
to his new role on the Front Bench. I know that he has a
distinguished legal career behind him, and that he has
represented some of the most vulnerable in our society.
His questions today go directly to the heart of the
matter and I am grateful to him for giving me this
opportunity to respond to them. We have spoken to the
Prison Officers Association. Senior figures in the National
Offender Management Service have been in touch with
the POA, and we will continue to be in touch in the
future. When the Prime Minister made a landmark
speech on prisons earlier this year, I had the opportunity
to talk to senior figures in the Prison Officers Association
and found their approach to be constructive and cordial,
and I want to maintain good relations with them.

The hon. Gentleman made the point that the £10 million
may need to be increased and that we may need to invest
more money in staff safety. We will of course monitor
how the money is spent. It has been given to individual
governors to spend as they think fit, but we will do
everything possible to ensure that the resources are
there to safeguard not only those who work in our
prisons, but the welfare of those in custody.

The hon. Gentleman asked specifically about the
prison and courts reform Bill and the principle that the
six reform prisons should have a greater degree of
autonomy. He asked whether academisation, as an analogy,
is a prelude to privatisation. The governors of those six
prisons do exercise a greater degree of autonomy, but it
is not intended that that should come at the cost of staff
terms, conditions, security, safety or prospects. We want
to ensure that staff in every prison feel that the idealistic
work that they do is valued and rewarded, and that
outstanding governors who are taking forward change
in such prisons live and breathe respect for their staff
every day.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The Prisons & Probation
Ombudsman told the Justice Committee about the
“pervasiveness” of mental health issues within prisons.
What is the Secretary of State doing to address that?
How is he improving the response of prison staff when
assessing such risks?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a good point.
One difficulty is that many of those in custody have
mental health problems—undiagnosed in some cases.

It is often the case that the prison regime by its very
nature and the restrictions that are placed on individuals
as part of a sentence may not be the most effective ways
of tackling mental health problems and ensuring that
offenders do not offend again. We are considering how
we can better review mental health provision within the
prison estate. More announcements will be forthcoming,
but Her Majesty made it clear in the Gracious Speech
that improving outcomes for individuals with mental
health problems in the criminal justice system is a core
mission of this Government over the next 12 months.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Is
the Secretary of State prepared to acknowledge that the
combination of rising prisoner numbers and shrinking
budgets is a major factor affecting the welfare and
safety of both prison officers and prisoners? The Scottish
Government have committed to significant penal policy
reform aimed at reducing reoffending by moving away
from ineffective short-term prison sentences in favour
of community sentences, which have been shown to be
more effective at stopping reoffending?

In June, the Scottish Government announced £4 million
of extra funding to allow for an increase in community
sentences. Will the Secretary of State acknowledge that
the UK Government’s policies and prisons are not
working? Will he look instead to the Scottish Government’s
approach of reducing the number of people in prison
and making more effective use of community alternatives,
rather than relying on prison sentences?

Michael Gove: I have an enormous amount of respect
for the hon. and learned Lady. She is right that England
and Wales can learn much from other jurisdictions. I
would not say that Scotland has got everything right on
criminal justice and penal policy, but some welcome
to be conversations take place in Scotland, not least with
respect to the care and treatment of female offenders. I
hope to have the chance to talk to leaders within the
Scottish Prison Service and to visit some Scottish prisons
to understand better what is working and to learn from
the initiatives that are being piloted.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Following that, will the
Justice Secretary tell us how the number of attacks on
staff in UK prisons compares with the figures for other
countries? What lessons might be learned from those
countries? I invite him to start by considering the
punishments handed down in other countries to prisoners
who attack prison staff and to extend sentences much
more harshly for prisoners who attack prison staff here.
I suspect that harsh sentences may lead to a decrease in
attacks on prison staff.

Michael Gove: I am grateful to my hon. Friend,
because I know that he wants to operate in a constructive
fashion. I am always interested in learning from other
jurisdictions. We do not collect statistics on assaults in a
way that allows for an easy comparison, but we are
changing how we analyse data within the Ministry of
Justice and he poses a particular challenge.

I always want to be led by the evidence when shaping
policy. The evidence suggests that a lack of hope or an
ability to see how actions can lead to eventual redemption
often contribute to frustration and violence. My hon.
Friend’s point was made in a constructive fashion, and I
will get back to him with evidence and comparisons to
enable us to conduct this debate better.
Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): One of the most distressing things that can happen to a prison officer is going to unlock an inmate only to find that they have taken their own life. The review by Lord Harris on deaths in custody made a clear recommendation that Ministers should attempt to contact and speak with the families of people, especially the young, who have taken their own life in prison. As yet, Ministers have declined to adopt that recommendation, so will they please reconsider?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes a very good point, and the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) will be meeting the relatives of someone who took their own life in custody recently. There are sometimes sensitivities about specific cases, but as a general rule this is something that, of course, we would wish to do.

Sir Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): From his experience as Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend will have worked out that there is a catalogue of reasons why the safety of prison staff is placed at risk: overcrowding of prisons; the mental health issues he has described; and the lack of purposeful activity for prisoners, which he has described. Does he also accept that the continuing uncertainty for prisoners on IPPs—indeterminate sentences for public protection—making them the most difficult cohort of prisoners to manage, is something we ought to be dealing with very quickly? Can we not arrange to have them re-sentenced quickly to determinate sentences or put before the Parole Board so that their cases can be reviewed? This is a matter of urgent priority and I urge him to look at the IPP question, which is causing such a lot of disturbance in our prison system.

Michael Gove: My right hon. and learned Friend is a busy man, so he probably will not have had an opportunity to read the speech I gave to the governing governors forum some six weeks ago. In it, I outlined the urgent case for reform of IPP sentencing and said that the former Member for Sheffield, Brightside, Lord Blunkett, had acknowledged that the original intention when he introduced those sentences had not manifested itself in the way in which those sentences were applied. I can say to my right hon. and learned Friend that I will be meeting Nick Hardwick, the new chair of the Parole Board, later this week specifically to expedite some changes which I hope my right hon. and learned Friend and others in the House might welcome.

Mr Speaker: I am sure the right hon. and learned Gentleman is keenly interested in the contents of the speech, and it may be a sentiment more widely shared. If that supposition on my part is judged to be accurate, perhaps the Secretary of State will place copies of the said speech in the Library of the House.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): We all look forward to reading the speech; whether or not it is in the Library, we will get a copy. The root cause of the problem is overcrowding, which creates stress on the staff and on other prisoners. Currently, there are 13,000 foreign national prisoners in our prisons, and the prisoner transfer arrangement with the EU has been going painfully slowly so far. We have now decided to come out of the EU. What further steps can be taken to get countries to take back their own citizens?

Michael Gove: First, I will, of course, place a copy in the Library. Secondly, for those who are even more eager to read it, I believe a copy is available on the Ministry of Justice website. We will do everything possible to facilitate the widespread dissemination and reading of that speech.

The Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee makes a very good point: there are far too many foreign national offenders in our prisons. I have been working with the Home Secretary to reduce those numbers. I am always loth to mention Albania, but some countries outside the European Union have concluded good bilateral arrangements with this country in order to facilitate the return of criminals, and Albania—outside the EU at the moment—is one such country. It is not necessary to be in the EU to have good bilateral arrangements, but it is vital, as we move to our new relationship with our European neighbours, to ensure that we return those offenders who are not British citizens.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): The safety of prison staff is a huge issue for me, as I have three prisons in my constituency. Does the Secretary of State agree that we will not get the rehabilitation of prisoners that we all want unless prison staff have the time and resources to enable it to happen and both they and prisoners feel safe enough to achieve it, and that this process will not be helped by ongoing reductions in prison staff numbers?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes a fair point. I am delighted that we have been able to give Durham prison in her constituency an additional £220,000 in order to help deal with current problems. More broadly, she is right. Even though staff were reduced in the previous Parliament in order to meet benchmarking requirements, there has been a net increase in the number of prison staff since January 2015, and we will be making more announcements in due course about how we intend to recruit even more high-quality people into that important job.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): How many times has the National Tactical Response Group been called out this year? Last year there was one call-out for every day of the year. Has this figure gone up?

Michael Gove: I hope the hon. Lady will excuse me as I turn to my notes in order to give her the exact figure. The last year for which we have figures was 2014-15 and the National Tactical Response Group was called out 400 times during that year, so that was just over once every day.¹

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): In my constituency there is no extra money for HMP Kenneff because it is closing. It has been open for only 10 years. In answers to letters that I have written to the right hon. Gentleman’s ministerial colleagues, I have been told that the staff will be expected to relocate to the new super-prison in Wrexham. The problem is that is that more than 70 miles away and there is no prospect of many of those staff being able to relocate. Is that not an example of one of the problems in the planning that the right hon. Gentleman is carrying out? He is closing a prison and the staff will not be able to get to the new one that he is opening. How will that help with problems of both overcrowding and prison staff safety?

¹[Official Report, 14 July 2016, Vol. 613, c. 4MC.]
Michael Gove: I would be delighted to meet, or have one of my colleagues meet, the hon. Gentleman in order to explain in greater detail the reasons for closing HMP Kennet. One of the things that we need to do is to make sure that we have modern and appropriate prisons for our prisoners. Of course, there will be opportunities not just in HMP Berwyn, the new prison in Wales, but elsewhere for staff who currently work in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency to continue to do the idealistic work for which I thank them.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I have spent a lot of time in prisons over the past few months. There are two things that staff have raised with me. The first is that they are optimistic about the reform context that the Secretary of State has created and he should be congratulated on that. However, the second topic that staff have raised at prisons across the country is staff numbers, which have fallen substantially. In the new Government that we expect to begin shortly, does the right hon. Gentleman hope to see that reform agenda continue? Now that we are moving away from austerity, is it possible that staff numbers might begin to rise again?

Michael Gove: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for what he says, and for the work that he is carrying out to ensure that black and minority ethnic individuals are treated fairly in our criminal justice system. On the reform programme, I have been delighted by the fact that across this House and throughout the Government there has been strong support for the reform programme that we are undertaking, and I think it will be central to the work of this Government over the next few years. I look forward to working with the right hon. Gentleman and other colleagues to ensure that we make progress.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is of paramount importance that the Government do all they can to ensure that prison staff are safe in their place of work. The Secretary of State will know that the recent safety in custody figures were quite shocking. Will he guarantee that when those figures are published in future, there will be fuller scrutiny of those statistics in Parliament, and will he commit to a frequent statement on what the Government are doing to improve the situation?

Michael Gove: Yes, I will do everything possible to make sure that Parliament is fully informed. That is entirely in line with the recommendations, which I welcome, from the Select Committee.
Parliament, cuts to defence spending across the alliance have now halted, with 20 allies now increasing defence spending, and eight allies committing in their national plans to reaching the 2% target.

Delivering the best for our country also means maximising the talent in our armed forces. The Prime Minister has accepted the recommendation of the Chief of the General Staff to open up ground close-combat roles to women. NATO’s role in preventing conflict and tackling problems at source has become ever more important as threats to alliance security grow out of instability and fragile or weak states. NATO’s defence capacity-building initiative, which was first announced in Wales, is a powerful tool in projecting stability and we in the United Kingdom continue to provide significant support to Georgia, Iraq and Jordan.

Building on that, the allies agreed that NATO will conduct training and capacity building inside Iraq. In Afghanistan, local forces are taking responsibility for providing security across their country. Our long-term commitment, as part of NATO’s Resolute Support mission, is crucial. Next year, we will increase our current troop contribution of 450 by 10% to help build the capacity of the Afghan security institutions.

The summit also reiterated its support for our European partners, including Ukraine and Georgia. I was delighted that Montenegro attended the summit as an observer, as a clear sign that NATO’s door remains open.

However, the scale of Europe’s security challenges means that NATO must work with a range of partners to counter them. This summit sent a strong message of NATO’s willingness to build strong relationships with other international institutions. I welcome the joint declaration by the NATO Secretary-General and the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission on NATO-EU co-operation. We continue to support a closer relationship between NATO and the EU to avoid unnecessary duplication.

Our strong message to our allies and our partners was that the result of the referendum will have no impact on any of our NATO commitments and that NATO remains the cornerstone of our defence policy. The United Kingdom will be leaving the European Union, but we are not reducing our commitment to European security—we are not turning our back on Europe or on the rest of the world.

HMS Mersey will deploy to the Aegean from late July to continue our support for NATO’s efforts to counter illegal migration. We will also provide a second ship—RFA Mounts Bay—to the EU’s Operation Sophia in the central Mediterranean, and NATO has agreed in principle to provide surveillance and reconnaissance support to that operation too.

It is a United Kingdom priority for NATO to do more against Daesh. NATO’s airborne warning and control system will now support the counter-Daesh coalition. In addition to our own assistance to the Government of national accord, we will consider what NATO can do in Libya—for example, through capacity building of the Libyan coastguard.

It is our firm view that the Warsaw summit successfully demonstrated that the alliance has the capacity, the will and the intent to respond to the range of threats and challenges that it may face. The summit also showed that Britain is stepping up its leading role in the alliance by deploying more forces to NATO’s eastern borders and to NATO’s support to Afghanistan and in countering illegal migration. With that strong UK leadership, Warsaw will be remembered for the concrete steps that were taken to deliver a strong and unified alliance that remains the cornerstone of European defence and security. I commend this statement to the House.

4.47 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): First, I thank the Secretary of State and his team for the work that they did at the Warsaw summit this weekend. I would also like to remind him that rumours of my going absent without leave in the muddy fields of Glastonbury were greatly exaggerated.

The Opposition welcome the clear message from the Warsaw summit that NATO is determined to strengthen its commitment to our friends and allies in eastern Europe. Whatever the consequences of Brexit—and there will be some that are unforeseeable—we must not let one of them be that the UK is seen as retreating into isolationism. We therefore welcome the Government’s readiness to make the United Kingdom one of the four contributor nations to the new rotational force announced last year. That force will have an important symbolic value in providing a visible reminder of the article 5 commitment to collective defence.

Members may have noted that I deliberately emphasised the word “collective”, and that is because, in essence, the basic values that underpin NATO—collective endeavour, human rights, liberty and democracy—which were specifically re-emphasised in the communiqué this weekend, are the same values that underpinned two of NATO’s key founders: Clement Attlee’s Labour party and the United States’ new deal Democrats. As such, the Opposition are entitled to share some of the credit for helping to build those values into the alliance—values Opposition Members can genuinely get behind and reaffirm. But let me get back to the detail.

Many questions remain about how the deployments in Estonia and Poland will work in practice, particularly in terms of equipment, training and rules of engagement. As such, I would be grateful if the Secretary of State would commit to providing regular updates to the House as these plans move forward.

In the light of ongoing tensions between NATO and Russia, I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State mention the need for dialogue. That commitment was echoed in the summit communiqué, which recognises the risk of misunderstanding and calls for a renewed commitment to improving dialogue, particularly through the NATO-Russia Council. However, what steps are the Government taking through bilateral channels to reduce the risk of misunderstanding between the UK and Russia, or of a possible miscalculation, on defence matters?

It is now well over a decade since NATO took command of multinational operations in Afghanistan, where more than 450 British servicemen and women have been killed since 2002. As many in the House will know, I spent some time in the Afghanistan theatre on operations. I have some personal experience having served a three-month tour there back in 2009 as part of the NATO deployment. I will draw on that in our future debates. Although the UK’s last remaining combat troops were
withdrawn in 2014, hundreds have stayed behind to continue training local Afghan security forces as part of NATO’s support mission. The announcement in Warsaw that a further 50 British troops will be deployed to Afghanistan next year, and the planned withdrawal date pushed back for a second time, will therefore be of concern to many. While I note that UK troops will continue to be deployed in non-combat roles, I would be grateful if the Secretary of State set out the measures that are in place to safeguard against the possibility of mission creep, given the substantial difficulties in handling over responsibility for the security of the country to Afghan forces themselves.

For a number of years, the UK has been the only major NATO power to continue to exclude women from ground close-combat roles. Labour Members therefore welcome wholeheartedly Friday’s announcement to approve the integration of women across all front-line combat roles. This decision is a huge step forward, not just for equality but for the effectiveness of the armed forces. In Iraq, in Afghanistan, and all over the world, women have served our armed forces with professionalism and distinction. I would be grateful for any information that the Secretary of State can provide today, or in the weeks ahead, as to what specific steps he will take to monitor and ensure the smooth transition of this process.

We must never lose sight of the vision of NATO’s founders. They understood that peace was always built on a foundation stone of justice—justice in the form of freedom, of democracy, and of economic fairness. The Secretary of State was right to affirm the UK’s commitment to NATO. I hope that the NATO he affirms is one that stays true to the vision of its founders, because that is a vision that Labour Members share and that I look forward to holding to account in the months ahead.

Michael Fallon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments and welcome him on his first appearance at the Dispatch Box. I think that he is the fourth shadow Defence Secretary in the past couple of years. I also welcome the broad welcome that he has given to this statement. I wholeheartedly welcome his reminder of the original establishment of NATO under a Labour Government who, of course, fully supported the nuclear deterrent at the time, and were ready, like every Labour Government, to commit that nuclear deterrent to the overall defence of the alliance, as well as the defence of this country. I am sure that he will explain all that in a little more detail when we come to the debate on Monday.

The hon. Gentleman asked four specific questions. First, on the battlefield to be deployed in Estonia, yes, I will update the House on the precise arrangements for that deployment, which will begin, we hope, in spring next year. As he will understand, there is much detail to be finalised with regard to the command and control relationships and the precise activities that the battalion will be involved in, but, yes, we will keep him and the House up to date on that.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman asked about the dialogue with Russia. I want to be very clear with the House: because of the annexation of Crimea and the aggression in Ukraine, it cannot now be business as usual with Russia, but there are interests that we have in common, as we saw in the refinement of the nuclear deal with Iran and ongoing discussions about a political settlement in Syria. It is right that we continue to talk to Russia in the areas where we have shared interests. I can confirm that the next meeting of the NATO-Russia Council will be on 13 July, and that we do continue links of the sort he mentioned, at ambassadorial level, to ensure that any misunderstandings can be avoided.

Thirdly, the hon. Gentleman asked about Afghanistan. Let me put on the record my tribute to him for his service in Afghanistan. We are increasing the number of troops deployed in Afghanistan by about 50. There is no danger of mission creep, because those additional 50 troops will be doing what the existing 450 are doing, which is supporting the security institutions, providing advice and support to the fledgling Afghan air force, and continuing the important work of mentoring at the officer academy. A number of other allies have been able to increase their support to Afghanistan. The hon. Gentleman will know, of course, that the alliance also welcomed the change of heart in the American position, which is not going to reduce down to the level originally forecast.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about the decision to open combat roles in the Army to women. I am glad that he has welcomed that. Of course, we will do it on a phased basis, continuing the essential research to set the right physical standards as each role is opened up. I am very happy to keep him up to date on that.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement, and thank him for emphasising the centrality of NATO in our collective defence. What particular discussions has he had with members of the European Union on those parts of the common security and defence policy that may continue to be of mutual benefit? I am thinking in particular of elements of the European Defence Agency and exercising with the EU battlegroups.

Michael Fallon: Let me make it very clear that, until we leave the European Union, we remain full members of it and committed to the security that it adds to that provided through NATO. That includes our participation in the EU battlegroup and in missions such as Operation Sophia in the central Mediterranean, to which we are now committing an additional ship. It is also seen in our continuing work to get the two organisations to work more closely together, avoid unnecessary duplication and co-operate more closely.

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): Paragraph 40 of the Warsaw summit communiqué focuses on NATO’s maritime security. Given that there are no surface vessels or maritime patrol aircraft based in Scotland, the UK Government are clearly failing in their duty. Did the Secretary of State have any discussions with his Norwegian counterpart over her plea earlier this year for increased co-operation in the maritime domain?

Paragraph 10 of the Warsaw summit communiqué lists a number of Russia’s destabilising actions and policies, including the annexation of Crimea; the deliberate destabilisation of eastern Ukraine; large-scale snap exercises; provocative military activities near NATO borders;
aggressive nuclear rhetoric; and repeated violations of NATO airspace. Which of those actions has been deterred by Trident?

Finally, paragraph 64 of the communiqué focuses on nuclear non-proliferation. What specific discussions did the Secretary of State have with NATO counterparts on further nuclear disarmament? In the coming weeks, my SNP colleagues and I will vote not to renew Trident. May I invite the Secretary of State and Labour MPs to join me in voting against it, so that we can achieve the alliance’s aim of a world without nuclear weapons?

Michael Fallon: In answer to the hon. Gentleman’s first point, the defence of the United Kingdom is organised on a United Kingdom basis. He should be in absolutely no doubt about that.

On our relationship with Norway, yes, I had a bilateral meeting with the Norwegian Minister. We work extremely closely on defending our respective countries and are looking for further areas of co-operation, particularly in the light of our strategic defence review and Norway’s long-term plan, which was published more recently.

On maritime patrol aircraft, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will have caught up with this morning’s announcement that we are to purchase nine Boeing P-8 aircraft, as announced by my right hon. Friend. Friend the Prime Minister with me at the Farnborough air show this morning. I hope it will not be too long before those patrol aircraft are able to help better protect our deterrent, as well as protect our aircraft carriers and conduct other tasks.

Non-proliferation was not subject matter for the Warsaw summit. We remain, in principle, committed to the search for a world without nuclear weapons. However, I have to say to the hon. Member and his party that I have to say to the hon. Member. Member and his party that there are 17,000 nuclear weapons out there and states that are trying to develop nuclear weapons. There remains the danger that others, such as non-state actors or terrorist groups, may try to get hold of nuclear weapons. That is why I will be inviting the House to vote next Monday to continue the principle of the nuclear deterrent that has served this country well and will protect it in the 2030s, 2040s and 2050s.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Let me say to my right hon. Friend how delighted I am that we have reaffirmed our commitment to the NATO alliance by sending the strong signal of using our troops on the ground in Estonia and Poland. Further, I thank him for making arrangements for French and Danish troops to join our battle group in Estonia. I speak as perhaps the only British officer to have commanded the 1st Parachute Battalion of the French Foreign Legion—albeit briefly.

Michael Fallon: The purpose of this deployment is to reassure our allies on the eastern border of NATO, as much as to make Russia think twice about any further aggression. I can tell my hon. Friend that our deployment in Estonia was warmly welcomed, not simply by Estonia but by the other Baltic states too. We are seeing now a coming together of the NATO countries and a commitment to each other’s formations, whether it is the very high-readiness joint taskforce or the enhanced forward presence. We particularly look forward to working with French and Danish troops alongside our battalion in Estonia next year.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The summit reiterated support for Georgia and Ukraine. However, in practical terms, what steps are being taken to support those countries in their bid for NATO membership and to ensure the defence of their borders?

Michael Fallon: Georgia is an enhanced opportunity partner of NATO and a package of measures is in place to strengthen defence co-operation between NATO and Georgia. We are playing a significant part in the training of the Ukrainian armed forces, building up their capacity to deal with the insurgency in eastern Ukraine and to reduce the number of casualties that they were suffering initially. As for future accession to NATO, we have made it very clear that there can be no shortcuts to NATO membership. There are criteria to meet, and any future applications require the unanimous consent of all the existing members. Equally, the accession of Montenegro sends a very clear message that nobody, and certainly not Russia, has any kind of veto on future membership.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend seen the remarks from the former Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev, who has expressed concern that we are moving from a new cold war to a hot one? Speaking as somebody who was a soldier in the cold war, I express grave concern that all we are really doing is irritating Russia by putting a number of troops on its border. We have to recognise that Russia has a zone of influence, which includes Ukraine and Belarus. If we do not find a way of negotiating with Russia, we are only going to make the danger of a new cold war, or possibly a hot war, more likely. We really have to look at these realities.

Michael Fallon: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s former service in the military, but I have to say to him, and to Russia, that NATO remains a defensive alliance and is not threatening anybody. However, given the commitments that we have all made to each other under article 5, it is very important that we reassure members, particularly those on the eastern flank of NATO, that we are ready to stand by those commitments and to come to their aid. I must remind my hon. Friend that they, of course, have seen Russia trying to change international borders by force, annexing Crimea and interfering in eastern Ukraine. It is very important that we remind members of NATO that it is committed to defending their territorial integrity, and that we send a message right across Europe to Moscow that we are not prepared to see the sovereign integrity of these countries further impugned.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Warsaw conference underlined NATO’s concept of deterrence. Does the Secretary of State agree that for deterrence to be effective, it has to be credible, and that any suggestion that our nuclear deterrent could be delivered other than by continuous at-sea deterrence would not only lead to its credibility being questioned, but threaten the nuclear posture of deterrence by NATO?

Michael Fallon: I absolutely agree with that. The previous coalition Government looked exhaustively at alternative systems for delivering such deterrence. We looked at whether it could be done from the air, from
land or with fewer boats, and the overwhelming conclusion of that review was that the simplest and most cost-effective form of deterrence is to maintain our existing four-boat nuclear submarine fleet. That is the purpose of the motion we will be putting before the House on Monday.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I am very grateful indeed for my right hon. Friend's robust statements on the NATO summit. Can he assure me that with the good news of more European nations pledging to spend 2% of their GDP on defence, and with the commitment to Trident, NATO will remain an alliance of co-operation between European states and Atlantic states?

Michael Fallon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what he has said, not least because I think we were on opposite sides of the argument during the referendum. The most encouraging thing since the Wales summit—fully confirmed at Warsaw—is the number of European countries that have put plans in place to increase their spending. The general decline of defence spending in Europe has been halted and is being reversed. Allies such as the Czech Republic, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, the Slovak Republic and Turkey are putting in place plans to get to the 2%, as we have done.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): With your permission, Mr Speaker, it might be helpful for me to pass on to the House the news that the Unite trade union has just reaffirmed its strong commitment to the building programme for the submarine fleet, which is going on in Barrow and across the nation. I hope that that will help Labour Members as we seek to fulfil our manifesto pledge to carry on and complete the programme that we began in government.

I turn to the vote that will take place on Monday. What, in the Government's view, would it do to the nuclear deterrent that has served us so well. We must send a further signal to the rest of the world that Britain is prepared to continue to play its part in the defence of NATO as well as of our own country. On the specific question about the cost of F-35, it is a little too early to be sure exactly where the sterling-dollar exchange rate will end up. Like any large commercial organisation, we take precautions against fluctuations in the currency, but it is too early to say whether that current level is likely to be sustained.
**Point of Order**

5.12 pm  

**Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have notified my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) of my intention to raise this issue. On Friday, a member of my staff had his parliamentary pass deactivated, following an email from the office of the Leader of the Opposition to the parliamentary pass office. The email advised the pass office to terminate the passes of a number of staff who work for former members of the shadow Cabinet. May I seek your advice, Mr Speaker, about the propriety of Members seeking to deactivate the passes of other Members' staff? Can you clarify the rules on that issue, because I was under the impression that authorising passes was the sole responsibility of the sponsoring Member?

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for notice of her point of order, and she is correct—that is the basis on which these matters are handled. I am conscious that the passes of the staff of several Members were incorrectly suspended temporarily on Friday. [Interruption.] Order. As soon as the error came to light, the passes were reinstated. We do not discuss security matters on the Floor of the House, so I do not propose to say anymore on the matter. Moreover, I do not need to do so because I have given the information that the hon. Lady sought, and I have specifically answered her point of order about where locus lies. Let us leave it there for now.

**Wales Bill**

**[2ND ALLOCATED DAY]**

Further considered in Committee

**[MR LINDSAY HOYLE in the Chair]**

**Clause 3**

LEGISLATIVE COMPETENCE

5.15 pm  

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): I beg to move amendment 118, page 2, line 28, after “7A)” insert “and is not ancillary to another provision (whether in the Act or another enactment) that does not relate to a reserved matter”.

Clause 3 establishes the legislative competence of the National Assembly for Wales. This amendment makes clear that the Assembly has power to make provision touching upon reserved matters for the purpose of enforcing provisions in Assembly Acts that do not relate to reserved matters or otherwise making them effective.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment 148, page 2, line 33, leave out “subsection (2)(b) does” and insert “subsections (2)(b) and (2)(c) do”. The amendment restores the Assembly’s competence by enabling it to legislate in an ancillary way in relation to reserved matters.

Amendment 149, page 2, line 34, leave out from “provision” to end of line 6 on page 3 and insert “which is within the Assembly’s legislative competence (or would be if it were included in an Act of the Assembly).” The amendment restores the Assembly’s competence by enabling it to legislate in an ancillary way in relation to reserved matters.

Clause 3 stand part.

Amendment 2, in schedule 1, page 41, line 24, at end insert—  
“(that is, the property, rights and interests under the management of the Crown Estate Commissioners)”  
‘(3A) Sub-paragraph (1) does not affect the reservation by paragraph 1 of the requirements of section 90B(5) to (8).’

This amendment is consequential on new Clause (The Crown Estate) which would transfer executive and legislative competence of the Crown Estate in Wales to the Welsh Government and the National Assembly for Wales.

Amendment 6, page 41, line 30, at end insert—  
“(that is, the property, rights and interests under the management of the Crown Estate Commissioners)”  
‘(3A) Sub-paragraph (1) does not affect the reservation by paragraph 1 of the requirements of section 90B(5) to (8).”

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This amendment is consequential on new Clause (The Crown Estate) which would transfer executive and legislative competence of the Crown Estate in Wales to the Welsh Government and the National Assembly for Wales.

Amendment 155, page 42, line 20, leave out “prosecutors” and insert “the Crown Prosecution Service”. The amendment clarifies the reservation so that “the Crown Prosecution Service” is reserved, rather than “prosecutors” more generally, as this could prohibit Assembly legislation enabling devolved authorities to prosecute, such as local authorities.

Amendment 119, page 42, line 26, leave out subparagraphs (2) and (3).
This amendment seeks to allow ancillary provision by removing the exception in paragraph 6(2) and the related definition in paragraph 6(3), so that reliance can be placed on the general power to make ancillary provision made clear by the amendment to clause 3 proposed by amendment 118.

Amendment 83, page 47, line 32, leave out Section B5.
This amendment removes the reservation of crime, public order and policing from the list of reserved powers.
Amendment 122, page 48, line 9, leave out “The subject matter of Parts 1 to 6” and insert “Anti-social behaviour injunctions under Part 1”.
This amendment is intended to narrow the reservation to the system of anti-social behaviour injunctions provided for by Part 1 of the 2014 Act.
Amendment 84, page 48, leave out line 11.
This amendment removes the reservation of dangerous dogs and dogs dangerously out of control from the list of reserved powers.
Amendment 85, page 48, line 15, leave out Section B8.
This amendment removes the reservation of prostitution from the list of reserved powers.
Amendment 86, page 48, line 24, leave out Section B11.
This amendment removes the reservation of the rehabilitation of offenders from the list of reserved powers.
Amendment 117, page 49, leave out lines 5 to 10.
This amendment will remove the reservation of knives from the list of reserved powers.
Amendment 123, page 49, leave out lines 24 to 29.
Paragraph 55 of the new Schedule 7A to be inserted into the Government of Wales Act 2006 by Schedule 1 would reserve the licensing of the provision of entertainment and late night refreshment from the Assembly’s legislative competence. Paragraph 56 would reserve the sale and supply of alcohol. This amendment removes both reservations.
Amendment 116, page 49, leave out lines 24 to 26.
This amendment will remove the reservation of the licensing of the provision of entertainment and late night refreshment from the list of reserved powers.
Amendment 87, page 49, line 27, leave out Section B17.
This amendment removes the reservation of alcohol from the list of reserved powers.

Government amendments 53 to 58.
Amendment 88, page 55, line 5, leave out Section C15.
This amendment removes the reservation of Water and sewerage from the list of reserved powers.
Amendment 89, page 55, line 28, leave out Section C17.
This amendment removes the reservation of Sunday trading from the list of reserved powers.
Amendment 90, page 55, line 32, leave out Section D1.
This amendment removes the reservation of generation, transmission, distribution and supply of electricity from the list of reserved powers.
Amendment 91, page 56, line 27, leave out Section D3.
This amendment removes the reservation of coal from the list of reserved powers.
Amendment 92, page 57, line 2, leave out Section D5.
This amendment removes the reservation of heat and cooling from the list of reserved powers.
Amendment 93, page 57, line 17, leave out Section D6.
This amendment removes the reservation of energy conservation from the list of reserved powers.

Amendment 94, page 57, line 24, leave out Section E1.
This amendment removes the reservation of road transport from the list of reserved powers.
Amendment 161, page 57, line 35, leave out from “roads” to the end of line 36 and insert—
“107A Speed limits
107B Road and traffic signs”
This amendment would make speed limits and road and traffic signs reserved matters.
Amendment 95, page 58, leave out line 36.
This amendment removes the reservation of railway services from the list of reserved powers.
Amendment 96, page 59, leave out line 21.
This amendment is consequential on amendment 61 to Clause 28 which would remove the exception to the devolution of executive functions in relation to Welsh harbours of “reserved trust ports”.
Amendment 140, page 59, line 21, leave out “Reserved trust ports and”.
Section E3 of the new Schedule 7A to be inserted into the Government of Wales Act 2006 by Schedule 1 would reserve certain marine and waterway transport matters from the Assembly’s legislative competence. Paragraph 119 in that Section would reserve trust ports. This amendment removes this reservation.
Amendment 97, page 59, leave out line 23.
This amendment removes the reservation of coastguard services and maritime search and rescue from the list of reserved powers.
Amendment 98, page 59, leave out line 24.
This amendment removes the reservation of hovercraft from the list of reserved powers.
Amendment 141, page 59, line 28, leave out “, reserved trust ports or”.
This amendment is consequential upon amendment 140.
Amendment 142, page 59, line 37, leave out “that is not a reserved trust port”.
This amendment is consequential upon amendment 140.
Amendment 143, page 60, leave out lines 4 to 5.
This amendment is consequential upon amendment 140.
Amendment 100, page 61, line 21, at end insert—
“Benefits entitlement to which, or the purposes of which, are the same as or similar to those of any of the following benefits—
(a) universal credit under Part 1 of the Welfare Reform Act 2012,
(b) jobseeker’s allowance (whether contributions-based or income based) under the Jobseekers Act 1995,
(c) employment and support allowance (whether contributory or income-related) under Part 1 of the Welfare Reform Act 2007,
(d) income support under section 124 of the Social Security and Benefits Act 1992,
(e) housing benefit under section 130 of that Act,
(f) child tax credit and working tax credit under the Tax Credits Act 2002.

The benefits referred to in paragraphs (a) to (f) above are—

(a) in the case of income-based jobseeker’s allowance and income-related employment support allowance, those benefits as they existed on 28 April 2013 (the day before their abolition),
(b) in the case of the other benefits, those benefits as they existed on 28 May 2015.”

This amendment deals with all working age benefits to be replaced by Universal credit, and any benefit introduced to replace Universal credit.
Amendment 101, page 61, line 21, at end insert—
This amendment devolves to the National Assembly for Wales, child benefit and Guardian’s allowance including conditionality and sanctions regimes.

Amendment 102, page 64, line 17, leave out Section H1.

This amendment would remove employment and industrial relations from the list of reserved powers.

Amendment 108, page 64, line 17, leave out Section H1 and insert—

“H1 National Minimum Wage

The subject-matter of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998.”

This amendment would devolve employment rights and duties and industrial relations, except for the national minimum wage, to the National Assembly for Wales.

Amendment 124, page 64, line 44, at end insert—

“Terms and conditions of employment and industrial relations in Wales public authorities and services contracted out or otherwise procured by such authorities.

Section H1 of the new Schedule 7A to be inserted into the Government of Wales Act 2006 by Schedule 1 would reserve employment rights and duties and industrial relations from Assembly’s legislative competence. This amendment provides an exception to ensure that the Assembly retains its legislative competence over terms and conditions of service for employees in devolved public services and industrial relations in such services.

Amendment 99, page 65, line 7, leave out Section H3.

This amendment would devolve employment support programmes to the National Assembly for Wales.

Amendment 109, page 65, line 24, leave out Section J1.

This amendment removes the reservation of abortion from the list of reserved powers.

Amendment 103, page 66, line 31, leave out Section J6.

This amendment would remove Health and Safety from the list of reserved powers.

Amendment 105, page 67, line 14, leave out Section K1.

This amendment would remove broadcasting from the list of reserved powers

Amendment 107, page 67, line 17, at end insert—

“Exceptions

The regulation of:

(a) party political broadcasts in connection with elections that are within the legislative competence of the Assembly and

(b) referendum campaign broadcasts in connection with referendums held under Acts of the National Assembly for Wales.”

This amendment would devolve competence to the National Assembly for Wales in relation to party political broadcasts for Welsh and local elections.

Amendment 106, page 67, line 29, leave out Section K5.

This amendment would remove sports grounds from the list of reservations

Amendment 110, page 68, line 2, leave out Section L1.

This amendment removes justice from the list of reserved powers.

Amendment 111, page 69, line 25, leave out Section L11.

This amendment removes the reservation of prisons and offender management from the list of reserved powers.

Amendment 104, page 72, line 14, leave out Section N1.

This amendment would remove equal opportunities from the list of reserved powers

Amendment 112, page 73, line 24, leave out “bank holidays”.

This amendment, along with amendment 85, will devolve to the National Assembly for Wales, competence over bank holidays.

Amendment 113, page 73, line 27, at end insert “bank holidays”.

This amendment, along with amendment 112, will devolve to the National Assembly for Wales, competence over bank holidays.

Amendment 114, page 74, line 7, leave out Section N8.

This amendment will remove the reservation of the Children’s Commissioner from the list of reserved powers.

Amendment 115, page 74, line 11, leave out Section N9.

This amendment will remove the reservation of teacher’s pay and conditions from the list of reserved powers.

That schedule 1 be the First schedule to the Bill.

Amendment 120, in schedule 2, page 77, line 17, at end insert—

“1A Paragraph 1 does not apply to a modification that is ancillary to a provision made (whether by the Act in question or another enactment) which does not relate to reserved matters if it is a modification of the law on reserved matters in paragraph 6 or 7 of Schedule 7A.”

This amendment provides an exception for ancillary provision about certain justice matters that is not subject to a necessity test.

Amendment 121, page 77, line 18, leave out “a” and insert “any other”.

This amendment is consequential upon amendment 120.

Amendment 156, page 77, line 21, leave out from “matters” to end of line 26.

The amendment removes the necessity test in relation to the law on reserved matters.

Amendment 157, page 78, line 2, leave out paragraph 4 and insert—

“(1) A provision of an Act of the Assembly cannot make modifications of, or confer power by subordinate legislation to make modifications of, the criminal law. (See also paragraph 6 of Schedule 7A (single legal jurisdiction of England and Wales).)

(2) Sub-paragraph (1) does not apply to a modification that has a purpose (other than modification of the criminal law) which does not relate to a reserved matter.

(3) This paragraph applies to civil penalties as it applies to offences; and references in this paragraph to the criminal law are to be read accordingly.)

The amendment inserts a restriction so that the Assembly cannot modify criminal law unless it is for a purpose other than a reserved purpose. This would bring it into line with the private law restriction.

Amendment 34, page 79, line 29, leave out from “Assembly” to end of line 39.

The amendment removes the requirements relating to the composition and internal arrangements of the Assembly Committee with oversight of the Auditor General and/or their functions.

Amendment 35, page 80, line 41, at end insert—

“(i) subsection 120(1) as regards a modification that adds a person or body;”

The amendment will enable the Assembly to amend sections 120(1) of the 2006 Act which provide for ‘relevant persons’ which receive funding directly from the Welsh Consolidated Fund.

Amendment 36, page 80, line 42, at end insert—

“(ii) subsection 124(3) as regards a modification that adds a person or body;”
The amendment will enable the Assembly to amend sections 124(3) of the 2006 Act which provide for ‘relevant persons’ which receive funding directly from the Welsh Consolidated Fund.

Amendment 37, page 81, line 22, leave out from “taxes” to end of line 23.

The amendment removes the requirement for Secretary of State consent for the Assembly to amend the provisions of Part 5 of the 2006 Act which are not specifically referred to in paragraph 7(2)(d) and section 159, where the amendment is incidental to, or consequential on, a provision of an Act of the Assembly relating to budgetary procedures.

Amendment 128, page 82, line 30, leave out paragraph (c).

This amendment is consequential upon amendment 127.

Amendment 127, page 82, line 44, at end insert—

‘( ) Paragraph 8(1)(a) and (c) does not apply in relation to the Water Services Regulation Authority.’

This amendment would extend the existing exception for the Water Services Regulation Authority to include the matters that would otherwise be outside competence by virtue of paragraph 8(1)(c) of Schedule 7B.

Amendment 129, page 83, line 42, leave out paragraph (c).

This amendment removes the restriction in paragraph 11(1)(c) of the new Schedule 7B to the Government of Wales Act 2006 to be inserted by Schedule 2 to the Bill which would prevent the Assembly from legislating to remove or modify functions of a Minister of the Crown exercisable in relation to water and sewerage matters (including control of pollution) and matters relating to land drainage, flood risk management and coastal protection.

That schedule 2 be the Second schedule to the Bill.

New clause 7—Levies in respect of agriculture, taking wild game, aquaculture and fisheries, etc.—

“(1) In Schedule 7A to the Government of Wales Act 2006, section A1 is amended as follows.

(2) In the Exceptions, after the exception for devolved taxes insert—

‘“Levies in respect of agriculture, taking wild game, aquaculture and fisheries (including sea fisheries) or a related activity: their collection and management.”

(3) After the Exceptions insert—

“Interpretation

“agriculture” includes horticulture, fruit growing, seed growing, dairy farming and livestock breeding and keeping, and the use of land as grazing land, meadow land, osier land, market gardens and nursery grounds.

“aquaculture” includes the breeding, rearing or cultivation of fish (of any kind), seafood or aquatic organisms.

“related activity” means the production, processing, manufacture, marketing or distribution of—

(a) anything (including any creature alive or dead) produced or taken in the course of agriculture, taking wild game or aquaculture, or caught (by any means) in a fishery;

(b) any product which is derived to any substantial extent from anything so produced or caught.”

This new clause would give the National Assembly for Wales general legislative competence in respect of agricultural, aquacultural and fisheries levies.

New clause 10—Water Services Regulation Authority.

“(1) In section 27 of the Water Industry Act 1991 (general duty of the authority to keep matters under review)—

(a) in subsection (3), after “may” insert “subject to subsection (3A)];”;

(b) after subsection (3), insert—

“(3A) The Secretary of State must obtain the consent of the Welsh Ministers before giving general directions under subsection (3) connected with—

(a) matters in relation to which functions are exercised by water or sewage undertakers whose area is wholly or mainly in Wales,

(b) licensed activities carried out by water supply licensees that use the supply system of a water undertaker whose area is wholly or mainly in Wales,

(c) licensed activities carried on by sewerage licensees that use the sewerage system of a sewerage undertaker whose area is wholly or mainly in Wales;”

(2) In section 192B of the Water Industry Act 1991 (annual and other reports)—

(a) in subsection (1), after “Secretary of State” insert “and the Welsh Ministers”;

(b) in subsection (2)(d), for “as the Assembly” substitute “or activities in Wales as the Welsh Ministers”;

(c) in subsection (4), for “Assembly” substitute “Welsh Ministers”;

(d) after subsection (5) insert—

“(5A) The Welsh Ministers shall—

(a) lay a copy of each annual report before the Assembly; and

(b) arrange for the report to be published in such manner as they consider appropriate;

(c) in subsection (7), omit “the Assembly, “”.

(3) In Schedule 1A to the Water Industry Act 1991 (the Water Services Regulation Authority)—

(a) in paragraph 1—

(i) in sub-paragraph (1), after “Secretary of State” insert “and the Welsh Ministers acting jointly”;

(ii) in sub-paragraph (2), omit paragraph (a);

(b) in paragraph 2(2), after “Secretary of State” insert “and the Welsh Ministers acting jointly”;

(c) in paragraph 3—

(i) in sub-paragraph (2), paragraph (a), after “Secretary of State” insert “and the Welsh Ministers”;

(ii) in sub-paragraph (2), paragraph (b), after “Secretary of State” insert “and the Welsh Ministers acting jointly”;

(iii) omit sub-paragraph (3);”

(d) in paragraph 4—

(i) in sub-paragraph (1) and (2), in each place where it appears, after “Secretary of State” insert “and the Welsh Ministers acting jointly”;

(ii) in sub-paragraph (3), for “determines” substitute “and the Welsh Ministers acting jointly determine” and at the end insert “and the Welsh Ministers acting jointly”;

(e) in paragraph 9(3)(b), for “Assembly” substitute “Welsh Ministers”.

This new clause would amend the Water Industry Act 1991 to confer functions relating to the Water Services Regulation Authority (OFWAT) (which exercises functions in England and Wales) onto the Welsh Ministers and it would adjust the functions of the Secretary of State to better reflect the current devolution of water matters to Wales.

Amendment 61, in clause 28, page 23, line 32, leave out from “Wales” to the end of line 33.

This amendment removes the exception to the devolution of executive functions in relation to Welsh harbours of “reserved trust ports”.

Amendment 134, page 23, line 38, leave out subsection (4).

Clause 28(4) provides an exception to the general transfer of functions by clause 28 so that where a function relates to two or more harbours the function is transferred only to the extent that both or all of the harbours to which it relates are wholly in Wales and are not reserved trust ports. This amendment is partly
consequential upon amendment 61, but it would also ensure that the Welsh Ministers retain functions where one harbour is in Wales and the other is not.

Amendment 62, page 23, line 40, leave out “and are not reserved trust ports”.

See amendment 61.

Amendment 63, page 24, leave out line 6.

See amendment 61.

Clause 28 stand part.

Amendment 64, in clause 29, page 24, line 13, leave out “, other than a reserved trust port.”

See amendment 61.

Amendment 65, page 24, line 17, leave out “, other than reserved trust ports”.

See amendment 61.

Amendment 66, page 24, line 21, leave out “or a reserved trust port”.

See amendment 61.

Amendment 67, page 24, line 25, leave out “other than a reserved trust port”.

See amendment 61.

Amendment 68, page 24, line 26, leave out subsection (5).

See amendment 61.

Amendment 69, page 24, line 31, leave out “other than a reserved trust port”

See amendment 61.

Clauses 29 to 31 stand part.

Amendment 137, in clause 32, page 25, leave out lines 44 to 39 and insert—

(a) will be wholly or partly in England or in waters adjacent to England up to the seaward limits of the territorial sea, and.

This amendment is consequential upon amendment 61.

Amendment 71, page 25, line 39, leave out “a reserved trust port”.

See amendment 61.

Amendment 138, page 25, line 41, leave out from beginning to end of line 3 on page 26 and insert—

(a) the harbour facilities are wholly or partly in England or in waters adjacent to England up to the seaward limits of the territorial sea, and.

This amendment is consequential upon amendment 61.

Amendment 72, page 26, line 2, leave out from “and” to end of line 3.

See amendment 61.

Amendment 73, page 26, line 4, leave out subsection (4).

See amendment 61.

Clauses 32 to 35 stand part.

New clause 1—The Crown Estate—


“89B The Crown Estate

(1) The Treasury may make a scheme transferring on the transfer date all the existing Welsh functions of the Crown Estate Commissioners (“the Commissioners”) to the Welsh Ministers or a person nominated by the Welsh Ministers (“the transferee”).

(2) The existing Welsh functions are the Commissioners’ functions relating to the part of the Crown Estate that, immediately before the transfer date, consists of—

(a) property, rights or interests in land in Wales, excluding property, rights or interests mentioned in subsection (3), and

(b) rights in relation to the Welsh zone.

(3) Where immediately before the transfer date part of the Crown Estate consists of property, rights or interests held by a limited partnership registered under the Limited Partnerships Act 1907, subsection (2)(a) excludes—

(a) the property, rights or interests, and

(b) any property, rights or interests in, or in a member of, a partner in the limited partnership.

(4) Functions relating to rights within subsection (2)(b) are to be treated for the purposes of this Act as exercisable in or as regards Wales.

(5) The property, rights and interests to which the existing Welsh functions relate must continue to be managed on behalf of the Crown.

(6) That does not prevent the disposal of property, rights or interests for the purposes of that management.

(7) Subsection (5) also applies to property, rights or interests acquired in the course of that management (except revenues to which section 1(1) of the Civil List Act 1952 applies or are to be paid into the Welsh Consolidated Fund).

(8) The property, rights and interests to which subsection (5) applies must be maintained as an estate in land or as estates in land managed separately (with any proportion of cash or investments that seems to the person managing the estate to be required for the discharge of functions relating to its management).

(9) The scheme may specify any property, rights or interests that appear to the Treasury to fall within subsection (2)(a) or (b), without prejudice to the functions transferred by the scheme.

(10) The scheme must provide for the transfer to the transferee of designated rights and liabilities of the Commissioners in connection with the functions transferred.

(11) The scheme must include provision to secure that the employment of any person in Crown employment (within the meaning of section 191 of the Employment Rights Act 1996) is not adversely affected by the transfer.

(12) The scheme must include such provision as the Treasury consider necessary or expedient—

(a) in the interests of defence or national security,

(b) in connection with access to land for the purposes of telecommunications, or with other matters falling within Section C9 in Part 2 of Schedule 1,

(c) for securing that the management of property, rights or interests to which subsection (5) applies does not conflict with the exploitation of resources falling within Section D2 in Part 2 of Schedule 1, or with other reserved matters in connection with their exploitation, and

(d) for securing consistency, in the interests of consumers, in the management of property, rights or interests to which subsection (5) applies and of property, rights or interests to which the Commissioners’ functions other than the existing Welsh functions relate, so far as it affects the transmission or distribution of electricity or the provision or use of electricity interconnectors.

(13) Any transfer by the scheme is subject to any provision under subsection (12).

(14) The scheme may include—

(a) incidental, supplemental and transitional provision,

(b) consequential provision, including provision amending an enactment, instrument or other document,

(c) provision conferring or imposing a function on any person including any successor of the transferee,

(d) provision for the creation of new rights or liabilities in relation to the functions transferred.
(15) On the transfer date, the existing Welsh functions and the designated rights and liabilities are transferred and vest in accordance with the scheme.

(16) A certificate by the Treasury that anything specified in the certificate has vested in any person by virtue of the scheme is conclusive evidence for all purposes.

(17) The Treasury may make a scheme under this section only with the agreement of the Welsh Ministers.

(18) The power to make a scheme under this section is exercisable by statutory instrument, a draft of which has been laid before, and approved by resolution of, the National Assembly for Wales.

(19) The power to amend the scheme is exercisable so as to provide for an amendment to have effect from the transfer date.

(20) If an order amends a scheme and does not contain provision—

(a) made by virtue of subsection (12) or (19) of that section, or

(b) adding to, replacing or omitting any part of the text of an Act,

then, instead of subsection (18), the instrument containing the legislation shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.

(21) For the purposes of the exercise on and after the transfer date of functions transferred by the scheme under this section, the Crown Estate Act 1961 applies in relation to the transferee as it applied immediately before that date to the Crown Estate Commissioners, with the following modifications—

(a) a reference to the Crown Estate is to be read as a reference to the property, rights and interests to which subsection (5) applies,

(b) the appropriate procedure for subordinate legislation is that no Minister of the Crown is to make the legislation unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before, and approved by resolution of, each House of Parliament,

(c) a reference to the Treasury is to be read as a reference to the Welsh Ministers,

(d) a reference to the Comptroller and Auditor General is to be read as a reference to the Auditor General for Wales,

(e) a reference to Parliament or either House of Parliament is to be read as a reference to the National Assembly for Wales,

(f) the following do not apply—

(None) in section 1, subsections (1), (4) and (7),

(None) in section 2, subsections (1) and (2) and, if the Welsh Ministers are the transferee, the words in subsection (3) from “in relation thereto” to the end,

(None) in section 3, the words “with the consent of Her Majesty signified under the Royal Sign Manual”,

(None) sections 5, 7 and 8 and Schedule 1.

(22) Subsection (7) is subject to any provision made by Order in Council under subsection (9) or by any other enactment, including an enactment comprised in, or in an instrument made under, an Act of the National Assembly for Wales.

(23) Her Majesty may by Order in Council make such provision as she considers appropriate for or in connection with the exercise by the transferee of the scheme (subject to subsections (5) to (8)) of functions transferred by the scheme, including provision taking effect on or before the transfer date.

(24) An Order in Council under subsection (23) may in particular—

(a) establish a body, including a body that may be nominated under that section as the transferee,

(b) amend, repeal, revoke or otherwise modify an enactment, an Act or Measure of the National Assembly for Wales, or an instrument made under an enactment or Act or Measure of the National Assembly for Wales.

(25) The power to make an Order in Council under subsection (24) is exercisable by Welsh statutory instrument subject to the affirmative procedure.

(26) That power is to be regarded as being exercisable within devolved competence before the transfer date for the purposes of making provision consequential on legislation of, or scrutinised by, the National Assembly for Wales.

(27) In this section—

“designated” means specified in or determined in accordance with the scheme,

“the transfer date” means a date specified by the scheme as the date on which the scheme is to have effect.”

This new clause mirrors the Scotland Act 2016 in transferring executive and legislative competence of the Crown Estate in Wales to the Welsh Government and the National Assembly for Wales.

Paul Flynn: Since we met in Committee last week, we have had the wonderful celebration of the Wales team’s great achievement in the European cup, which is a matter of enormous pride to us as a nation. I was delighted to see the celebrations on Saturday, which were the biggest thing to happen in Cardiff since VE-day and VJ-day, which I am sure we both remember, Mr Hoyle, if not since when Cardiff won the FA cup in 1926. These events will bring many benefits for the people of Wales. We feel pride not just in the skills of our team, but in the behaviour of our fans.

I saw a performance by the Secretary of State on television yesterday in which he was dancing with a ball on his head and foot. It seemed to be a wordless message: I did not quite get the point. Given these uncertain political times, he might have been auditioning for a future job as a circus performer, but perhaps there was a subliminal message that had he been substituted for Aaron Ramsey, the result of the Portugal game might have been different. None the less, we have had a moment of great happiness for our country. It is a joy to think that the beautiful national language in our anthem was probably heard by more people than at any time in its 3,000-year history. That intrigued many people, and Wales has been given a much sharper identity that will bring about practical benefits.

The Bill’s is proceeding in a consensual way. A great political tumult is going on about our ears, in various forms, but here is an oasis of calm and good sense, as all parties support a beneficial Bill that will give Wales further devolution. Progress on that is slow and endless, but the Bill is a step forward.

I will speak first to amendments 118 and 119. Amendment 118, together with consequential amendments to paragraph 6 of proposed new section 7A to the Government of Wales Act 2006 under schedule 1, and to paragraph 1 of proposed new schedule 7B under schedule 2, take us back to issues flowing from the Government’s insistence on retaining the single legal jurisdiction of England and Wales. In accepting that position, as we must following last Tuesday’s Division, we must now ensure that the Assembly has, within the single jurisdiction, powers that enable its legislation to be enforceable and effective, which is what amendment 118 would achieve.

In our view, the Bill as drafted would restrict the Assembly’s legislative competence inappropriately and reverse the competence given to the Assembly under the 2006 Act, section 108(5) of which allows the Assembly to make what might be termed “ancillary” provisions.
At present, the Assembly has competence to legislate on matters relating to one or more of the listed subjects in part 1 of schedule 7 to the 2006 Act. That Act also provides that the Assembly has powers to make provision about non-devolved matters when that is done to make a devolved provision effective or to enforce a provision if it is otherwise consequential or incidental to the devolved provision. My understanding is that this is not the UK Government’s intention, meaning that our old friend unintentional consequences might well apply.

I am sure that the Government do not, in common with all parties in the House, intend to prevent the Assembly from making provision to enforce or to make effective devolved legislation. However, the Bill currently either prevents that, or is unclear about whether the Assembly will have the same ability as at present. Under the reserved power model, an Assembly Act will be outside competence if it relates to a reserved matter in proposed new schedule 7A. There is no express equivalent in the Bill to section 108(5) of the 2006 Act. Provisions relating to reserved matters will be outside competence and will not be law even if the intent of the provision in question is confined to making legislation effective or to enforce it. Other provisions are designed to address this issue, but Welsh Government officials have provided the Wales Office with several examples of when the Bill as drafted would have prevented uncontentious provisions in Assembly Acts from being included in that legislation.

These are not hypothetical problems. We have a strange history of the consequences of legislation. We have sometimes had legislation that was cumbersome and slow, while we have also seen judge-driven legislation involving Acts that were subject to adjudication by people outside Wales. Unless the Bill is amended as we propose, the Assembly’s ability to make its legislation enforceable and effective will be inappropriately constrained, and I do not believe that that is the Secretary of State’s intention. We shall not press the amendments to a Division, but I urge the Secretary of State to give very careful consideration to the issues that they raise, to instruct his officials to discuss them further with Welsh Government officials and to table amendments on Report that reflect an agreed position on this important issue.

Let me mention some of the general principles that should apply to our consideration of the schedule of reserved matters. In a reserved power model, it is for the UK Government to explain why the relevant subject matter must be reserved to the centre—to the UK Parliament and Government—for decision. Much of the schedule’s content is uncontroversial. It is common ground that matters such as foreign affairs, the armed forces and the UK’s security system should be determined at a UK level. On other matters, however, the situation is more contested. If reservations affect the Assembly’s existing competence, it is vital that the case for them is made explicitly and that the drafting of the relevant provision is precise and specific. That is essential to protect the Assembly’s ability to legislate coherently and within its competence.

Amendment 83 deals with policing, which is an interesting subject area on which change is desirable. The UK Government’s own Silk commission recommended devolution of policing on the basis that it is a public service that is a particular concern to people in their daily lives, and therefore similar to health, education and the fire service. That conclusion was reached in the light of extensive evidence, including from professional police bodies, chief constables and police and crime commissioners. I understand that the four present PCCs in Wales are in favour of such a change, and opinion polls show clear public support for it.

Silk noted that devolution would improve accountability by aligning police responsibility with police funding, much of which already comes from devolved sources. In short, he argued that devolution would allow crime and the causes of crime to be tackled holistically under the overall policy framework of the Welsh Government. As Silk noted, present arrangements are “complex”, “incoherent” and “lack transparency”.

Policing is the only major front-line public service that is not at present the responsibility of the devolved institutions in Wales. That anomalous position means that it is significantly more difficult to achieve advantages of collaboration with other blue light services, which is strongly advocated for England in current Government policy, as well as with other relevant public services. Deleting the reservation would address that anomaly, but responsibility for counter-terrorism activity should not be devolved—I would continue to argue that it should be reserved under paragraph 31 of new schedule 7A. The Assembly would be able to legislate in respect of bodies such as the National Crime Agency and the British Transport police only with the consent of UK Ministers, because they are “public authorities” within the meaning of paragraph 8 of new schedule 7B, which restricts the Assembly’s powers in respect of such bodies.

After reflecting on the Silk commission’s recommendations, what is envisaged is the devolution of responsibilities predominantly for local policing. The key point is that devolution would enable police services in Wales to work even more closely alongside other devolved public bodies, with greater opportunities to secure improved community safety and crime prevention.

In England—this is a fine example on which we can base our recommendations—the UK Government are pushing forward the devolution of policing and justice powers with the greatest enthusiasm. Only last week, it was reported that the Minister responsible for prisons—the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous)—declared himself as “a firm fan of devolution”.

Having signed over new powers to the mayor of Greater Manchester, he hailed “a new dawn for the justice system” that is “run by locals, for locals” and is an effective justice system that meets the needs of local people. However, in a reserved power model of devolution for Wales, there is an overriding imperative to keep the control of these matters in Whitehall. Where is the consistency and fair treatment for Wales? If something is good enough for Manchester, surely it is good enough for Wales.

Amendment 122 deals with antisocial behaviour. Whatever the outcome on policing, it is imperative that we do not reduce the Assembly’s existing competence for dealing with antisocial behaviour in devolved contexts. That is why there needs to be an amendment to paragraph 41 of new schedule 7A, which relates to antisocial behaviour. As drafted, the Bill would reserve
matters that are currently within the Assembly’s legislative competence, such as antisocial behavioural matters relating to housing or nuisance. That would represent a significant reduction of the Assembly’s existing competence, so the Welsh Government amendment would narrow the reservation to more closely reflect the current situation.

Amendment 123 is on the vexed subject of alcohol. As drafted, the Bill would reserve the sale and supply of alcohol, and the licensing of provision of entertainment and late-night refreshment. The amendment would delete the reservations and allow the Assembly to legislate on those matters.

Alcohol misuse is a major public health issue and a principal cause of preventable death and illness in Wales. It can lead to a great many health and social harm problems, in particular for a significant minority of addicts and people who drink to excess for other reasons. Given those impacts and the direct link with devolved responsibility for public health and the NHS, there is a pressing need to tackle alcohol misuse, so the Assembly and Welsh Government must have the full range of tools at their disposal. Policies that control the way in which alcohol is sold and supplied are widely acknowledged to be among the most effective mechanisms for tackling alcohol-related harms. Regulating the availability of alcohol is an important way to reduce the harmful use of alcohol, particularly by tackling easy access to alcohol by vulnerable and high-risk groups. Licensing controls are an essential tool which must form part of the Welsh Government’s strategy to tackle alcohol-related abuse. The reservations place unnecessary and inappropriate constraints on action to tackle alcohol availability in Wales. Those powers are devolved in Scotland and in Northern Ireland, where similar public health challenges were faced, and they should also be devolved in Wales.

5.30 pm

The Bill, as drafted, would enable the Assembly to legislate on ports and harbours, and would also transfer additional Executive functions in respect of them from the Secretary of State to Welsh Ministers. That is welcome, and is in line with the Silk recommendations. However, the Bill also creates a specific category of “reserved trust ports”, on which the Assembly could not legislate and in respect of which Welsh Ministers cannot exercise any powers. The Bill defines reserved trust ports in such a way that only Milford Haven would be such a port.

Why is that reservation necessary? Silk did not recommend reserving any trust port, and neither did the St David’s day Command Paper. When giving evidence on the draft Bill to the Welsh Affairs Committee, the then Secretary of State said that the purpose of the clause was to reserve Milford Haven specifically as a strategic energy port owing to its status, but the United Kingdom Government, inconsistently, declined to cite energy security as a policy driver for an investment in Milford Haven to support the sale of the Murco refinery in 2014. Aberdeen trust port could equally be seen as a strategic energy port, given the importance of North sea oil to the UK, yet it was devolved to the Scottish Government. Why on earth should the same not happen to Milford Haven? Why should its control not be devolved to the Welsh Assembly?

The concept of a reserved trust port is unnecessary and inappropriate, and should be removed from the Bill. That would enable the Assembly to have legislative competence in respect of all trust ports in Wales, including Milford Haven. As recommended by Silk and the Welsh Ministers, powers should, by virtue of the amendments, extend to Milford Haven, as they will to other harbours in the country.

Amendment 124 covers employment and industrial relations in devolved public services. The devolved public service workforce, comprising those working in “Wales public authorities” as defined in the Bill, or engaged in public services that are contracted out or otherwise procured by such authorities, are intrinsically inseparable from the services and functions of those authorities, all of which work within the devolved sphere. The workforce are the main means by which authorities carry out their functions and provide services for the public. There is a well-recognised link between good employment practices and industrial relations within authorities, and the quality of the services that they provide for the public.

As the Bill is drafted, the Assembly would not be able to legislate on workforce matters in devolved services. The amendment proposes an exception that the general reservation preventing the Assembly from legislating on matters relating to employment and industrial relations would not undermine the Assembly’s ability to legislate in respect of devolved public services and the devolved public service workforce. The amendment would not undermine the shared framework and protections in respect of employment and industrial relations spanning the private and public sectors across the United Kingdom, but would give the Assembly a chance to augment them where appropriate, to support the effective delivery of devolved public services by Wales public authorities.

Amendment 195 deals with teachers’ pay and conditions. We agree that this reservation should be omitted. Education has been a devolved matter since the establishment of the Assembly, and retaining the reservation would be anomalous by comparison with the other devolution settlements, as confirmed by the Silk commission. Teachers’ pay and conditions are an integral part of the school system, and closely interrelated to the devolved education function. Maintaining this reservation and the associated Secretary of State’s functions, when the two education systems in England and Wales are diverging year on year, makes it more difficult for the Welsh Government to deliver Welsh priorities with the national pay systems and structures set up to support a different, English employment model. This is the whole principle of devolution on which we all agree.

The UK Government’s academisation programme, for example, does not require the same statutory compliance with the “School teachers’ pay and conditions” document that is required for all maintained schools in Wales. Additionally, the freedom in England for academies not to comply with the same professional registration standards does not operate in Welsh maintained schools. This means that the School Teachers Review Body report every year tends to reflect a different educational context. The relevance of the current process, driven by the fact that the Secretary of State’s remit to the review body does not reflect Welsh issues, is diminishing in relation to Wales. The Assembly should have legislative competence in this matter, and Executive responsibility should transfer
to Welsh Ministers to allow for the development of an effective workforce strategy that reflects the needs of Welsh schools.

Water and sewerage are covered in amendments 128, 127 and 129, and we seek the deletion of the reservations 90 and 91. There are several different aspects to policy on water. The Secretary of State is well aware of how sensitive the matter this has been for generations; I think he agrees it has been a matter of great contention. I recall many years ago going to inspect public toilets in mid-Wales and seeing a notice on them saying, “Please flush twice; England needs our water.”

There has been a recognition that water is a great national resource of Wales that is available in great abundance. We have a great richness in water resources, but, sadly, there is the great history of Tryweryn and other matters that concerned us over many years, when Wales was plundered for its natural resources without compensation.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The hon. Gentleman mentions Tryweryn, and it is of course 50 years since Gwynfor Evans won that famous by-election in Carmarthen in 1966. The major stimulus of that great victory that changed Welsh, and, arguably, UK, politics was, of course, the drowning of Tryweryn. Does the hon. Gentleman think it would be a fitting memorial to that great victory by Gwynfor Evans that this Bill finally contains the devolution of water resources to Wales?

Paul Flynn: I think that would be entirely appropriate. The hon. Gentleman reminds us of matters that were subjects of great passion at the time. I believe they did—as many points in history have—concentrate the feelings of those in Wales about their national identity and what was seen to be an injustice against the people of Wales. I remember the events vividly.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): On the subject of Tryweryn, will my hon. Friend be so kind as to put on record his admiration for Lord Thomas William Jones who was of course at the time the Member of Parliament for Meirionnydd and chaired the action committee? Originally, of course, he was a native of Ponciau as well.

Paul Flynn: I am very happy to record that. It is also worth mentioning that Tryweryn was opposed by every Welsh-speaking Labour MP and peers took part in the early days of establishing a Welsh identity, particularly in the north Wales area. We had a large number of Welsh-speaking Labour MPs here, and they could only dream about a day like today when we are passing the legislation that their generation had a large number of Welsh-speaking Labour MPs here, and they could only dream about a day like today when we are passing the legislation that their generation could only dream about a day like today when we are passing the legislation that their generation could only dream about a day like today when we are passing the legislation that their generation had such a dream. The Secretary of State’s existing legislative and executive powers allow intervention if a Bill might have a seriously adverse impact on sewerage services or systems in England. The Wales Bill would add to this by allowing intervention if a Bill might have a seriously adverse impact on sewerage services or systems in England.

In the view of the Welsh Government, with which I totally agree, the intervention power in respect of water should be replaced by a memorandum of understanding between the Welsh and UK Governments on how cross-border water issues should be managed. This was also the view of the Silk commission, which recommended that “a formal intergovernmental protocol should be established in relation to cross-border issues”. It also recommended that “the Secretary of State’s existing legislative and executive powers of intervention in relation to water should be removed in favour of mechanisms under the inter-governmental protocol”.

It follows that the Welsh Government are opposed to the proposed extension by clause 44 of these intervention powers to sewerage, and would also wish to see sections 114 and 152 of the 2006 Act amended to remove these intervention powers in relation to water.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The hon. Gentleman has mentioned sections 114 and 152. I should like to draw to his attention our amendment 81, which I hope will be debated later and which I hope to press to a vote. It would remove those sections from the legislation. I do not want to pre-empt the debate now, but I want to give him fair warning that we will be taking that stance, which would achieve precisely the end that he has just described.

Paul Flynn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for pointing that out. We agree with many of the amendments that he and his party have tabled, although we want to have further consultations on some of them. The speed at which the Bill is going through—although very agreeable—means that we have not yet consulted certain groups or individuals. We might not support the hon. Gentleman’s amendments in the Lobby, but we agree with a great many of them. However, we hope to divide the Committee on our amendment 123 later.
Finally, new clause 10 relates to Ofwat accountability. Ofwat should be fully accountable to the National Assembly for Wales in respect of the functions it exercises in relation to Wales, especially as legislative competence in respect of water and sewerage would be fully devolved. The new clause would make it a requirement for Ofwat to produce a report for Welsh Ministers and for that report to be laid before the National Assembly. New clause 10 is proposed to section 27 of the Water Industry Act 1991 to require the Secretary of State to seek the consent of Welsh Ministers before giving directions to Ofwat in respect of such matters.

I am grateful to the Committee for its patience in listening to my remarks on a large number of amendments. For the ones relating to Ofwat, we suggest that the changes are necessary so that Ofwat is fully accountable to the National Assembly and Welsh Ministers for these functions exercisable in relation to Wales. They represent another step forward for devolution and I will be grateful if the Government and the Committee give the proposals serious consideration.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I will speak briefly to amendment 161 in my name and those of my hon. Friends the Members for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) and for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies). It would amend schedule 1 to the Bill by reserving the setting of speed limits in Wales and the design of road and traffic signs. The whole purpose of devolution should be to make life not more difficult but easier. We will be debating a great many practical amendments to the Bill this evening and this is one where the practical purpose of devolution would be better served by reserving such competences.

Dealing first with speed limits, I strongly suggest that it would be highly counterproductive for speed limits to differ between England and Wales because the road systems of England and Wales are closely integrated. Every day, many thousands of commuters travel backwards and forwards across the border. At certain times of year, such as holiday periods, there are considerable numbers of visitors from other parts of the United Kingdom and the continent of Europe. Such people are not confined to the principal arterial routes of the M4 and the A55, because several other important routes—going both east to west and north to south—cross the border. I am particularly thinking of the A483, the principal route between Manchester and Swansea that crosses and re-crosses the border at several points, and the A490, another well-known border route. To have different national speed limits at distances of possibly every two or three miles would be at the very least confusing and at the very worst positively dangerous.

The context of England and Wales is different from the context of England and Scotland because the integration of the road network between England and Wales is far closer. Given the practicalities, it makes no sense whatsoever to devolve the setting of speed limits to Cardiff.

Mr Jones: I think it is fair to say exactly that; the hon. Gentleman will remember the former chief constable of North Wales who generated substantial funds out of motorists’ inattention to speed limits. My point is not so much about local speed limits but about national speed limits. It is far more sensible if the national speed limit is set by the Department for Transport in London—if necessary, in consultation with the Welsh Assembly Government. Given that there is such a closely integrated main transport road network between the two nations, it makes no sense to have differential speed limits.

The second point I wish to make is about road signs and I do so principally on the same grounds; as we have such a closely integrated road network, there is the potential to cause considerable difficulty if the Welsh Government were to decide, for whatever reason, completely to redesign road signs. Again, that would be not only confusing, but positively dangerous. The competence for the design of road signs should remain with the DIT in London, although there should be consultation with the Welsh Government.

Hywel Williams: Is the right hon. Gentleman’s contention based on any research? I recall, and so will he, the extensive debate in Wales about having Welsh language road signs or bilingual signs. Research was done on various aspects of that, by the Road Research Laboratory, the AA and various people, and they predicted all kinds of doom should we have bilingual signs. Can he point us to any similar research on road signs or differential speed limits?

Mr Jones: I have no objection whatever to bilingual road signs—they should be positively encouraged. This is not so much about the language as about the design of the sign. Most of our road signs follow standard European norms, although they may not in the future. If we are to have consistency and avoid danger to motorists, we should have consistency in the design of road signage.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): My constituency contains roads that traverse both England and Wales. What a pity it would be if our gorgeous countryside was to be littered with even more road signs, up and down those roads, up and down Wales, and up and down the Marches. What a great shame it would be for the visitors who come to Wales for that wonderful experience.

Mr Jones: I am sure we could have fewer signs, although we might have more. My concern is that they should not be so different as to cause accidents on the part of motorists wondering what the heck a sign meant as they passed it. On practicality, there is not a persuasive case being made here; I never really understood the case for the devolution of road signs.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Is the far more distracting and dangerous thing in country fields not all these Tory posters we get at election time? They cause far greater danger and distraction to motorists than any road signs.
Mr Jones: I have never received anything but praise for Conservative signage, and I received even more praise for the vote leave signs that were notable by their presence throughout Wales.

This is a probing amendment and I do not intend to press it to a vote, but I would be grateful to hear from Ministers the rationale for these two proposals. Let me say again that at the very least they are confusing and at the very worst they have the potential to be positively dangerous.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I must take this opportunity to congratulate the Welsh team on giving us the brightest, most joyful memories of the past few weeks—it is safe to say that.

I rise to speak to the amendments standing in my name and those of my Plaid Cymru colleagues. They seek to amend schedule 7A of the Government of Wales Act 2006 and, thus, relate to clause 3 of this Bill, which deals with the legislative competence of the National Assembly for Wales. The vast majority of our amendments in this group seek to omit certain reservations from that schedule. The amendments are intended in some cases to restore competence in areas that are already devolved. In others, they are intended to devolve competence to the Assembly in areas that are devolved to Scotland. If the Government are not prepared to give the Welsh Assembly parity with the Scottish Parliament in these areas, we would ask for specific reasons to be given in each instance. Both the Welsh Affairs Committee in this place and the National Assembly’s Constitutional and Legislative Affairs Committee have written reports on the draft Wales Bill, with both calling on the UK Government to provide individual justifications for each of the reservations now contained in schedule 7A. As such, it is a great disappointment to my colleagues and I that the Government have not seen fit to provide us with these justifications. I invite the Secretary of State to explain why the Government have not been forthcoming in this instance. If valid justifications cannot be provided, the Government should amend the schedule so as to omit those areas outlined in our amendments.

Plaid Cymru has not been alone in saying—over many years—that the National Assembly should move to a reserved powers model. Indeed, the independent, cross-party Silk commission made just such a recommendation. Legal experts and much of civil society in Wales, recognise that adopting a reserved powers model should, in theory, provide greater legal clarity and workability. The idea of moving towards a reserved powers model has also been taken in Wales to symbolise a shift in Westminster’s attitude towards the Assembly, because it was assumed to be synonymous with a maturing of relations between the two institutions. Rather than having to justify devolving an area of competence, Westminster would be compelled to justify reserving an area of law; again, that should have represented a significant attitudinal shift, and a recognition of greater parity. The shear length of the list of reserved areas in schedule 1 has made a mockery of that notion.

It should therefore have come as no surprise to the Wales Office that the original draft Wales Bill was met with such dismay by the Welsh Assembly and by civil society in our nation. The dismayingly long list of reservations, and the way in which the Bill went so far in some cases as to curtail powers already devolved, would fundamentally undermine the Assembly’s competence. It would do the opposite of what was, presumably, intended. Although we are grateful that the previous Secretary of State announced a pause in introducing the legislation, we still believe that schedule 7A shows a paucity of ambition for Wales and her legislature, and that is why we have drafted the amendments in this grouping.

Amendments 83, 86, 110 and 111 should be considered together, as they seek to devolve aspects of the justice system to the Assembly: the legal profession and legal services are dealt with in amendment 110; crime, public order and policing are dealt with in amendment 83; the rehabilitation of offenders is dealt with in amendment 86; and prisons and offender management are dealt with in amendment 111. As has been pointed out in this House on many occasions, and as was championed by my predecessor, Elfyn Llwyd, Wales is the only legislature that has no separate or distinct legal jurisdiction of its own. The matter of a separate legal jurisdiction was debated last week, so I will not repeat my arguments. Although I accept that the Tories fundamentally disagree with the need for a separate jurisdiction, I remain somewhat confused by the position of the official Opposition, who said last week that they supported it but abstained because the Government do not support it. If the official Opposition can only vote in favour of measures that are supported by the Government, they are not well fitted to being the official Opposition. However, given that our amendment was defeated last week, we will use the Report stage of the Bill to bring forward proposals on a distinct, rather than separate, jurisdiction. I hope that the House will be more open to working with us when that time comes.

As is well known, the Silk commission recommended the devolution of policing and related areas of community safety and crime prevention, and my party is resolute in our standpoint that Wales, like the other nations of the United Kingdom, should have responsibility for its police forces.

We are presenting amendment 83 at a time when it is being proposed that policing is devolved to English city regions—Manchester and Liverpool, for example. If the policing of these cities can be held to account in a devolved landscape, why not the policing of Wales?

6 pm

The First Minister of the devolved Assembly supports the devolution of policing. All four police and crime commissioners support the devolution of policing. I welcome what was said by the shadow Secretary of State for Wales earlier about the devolution of policing, and I argue strongly, therefore, that the time is right for that to move ahead, to enable the police of Wales to work directly to improve the lives and safety of the people of Wales, according to their unique needs and priorities. With that in mind, I intend to press amendment 83 to a Division.

We believe also that prisons and offender management should be devolved so that sentences, magistrates and probation can reflect the distinct priorities of a separate legal jurisdiction. Wales should have a prison system to the Assembly: the legal profession and legal services are dealt with in amendment 110; crime, public order and policing are dealt with in amendment 83; the rehabilitation of offenders is dealt with in amendment 86; and prisons and offender management are dealt with in amendment 111. As has been pointed out in this House on many occasions, and as was championed by my predecessor, Elfyn Llwyd, Wales is the only legislature that has no separate or distinct legal jurisdiction of its own. The matter of a separate legal jurisdiction was debated last week, so I will not repeat my arguments. Although I accept that the Tories fundamentally disagree with the need for a separate jurisdiction, I remain somewhat confused by the position of the official Opposition, who said last week that they supported it but abstained because the Government do not support it. If the official Opposition can only vote in favour of measures that are supported by the Government, they are not well fitted to being the official Opposition. However, given that our amendment was defeated last week, we will use the Report stage of the Bill to bring forward proposals on a distinct, rather than separate, jurisdiction. I hope that the House will be more open to working with us when that time comes.

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Hywel Williams: Does my hon. Friend not think it scandalous that there is no provision for women prisoners in Wales? There are very few women prisoners, but they are held in England in Styal and in Eastwood Park outside Gloucester. That causes problems for prisoners’ families, particularly from the west of Wales.

Liz Saville Roberts: Indeed. We are aware that in the north that there is no prison for women or for young offenders. There are many steps afoot, which are to be welcomed, to improve how women who enter the criminal justice system are treated in Wales, alongside imprisonment. HMP Styal is a long way from people’s homes and there must be a better way to deal with offenders’ families.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): The hon. Lady mentioned the rehabilitation of young offenders. Devolution of these matters would support the critical interrelationship between health and education services in making rehabilitation successful. Recognition of that fact is a gross omission from the Bill.

Liz Saville Roberts: I can only agree.

Jonathan Edwards: As always, my hon. Friend is making a compelling case, full of strong arguments. Does she agree that it is slightly ironic that a referendum has just been won by those arguing for the UK to leave the European Union, partly on the basis of democracy and sovereignty, yet here we are, debating a Wales Bill which, compared with the settlement for Scotland and Northern Ireland, seems to deny sovereignty and democracy to Wales?

Liz Saville Roberts: With the Bill we are moving ahead in small steps—inching forward, painfully. I await the time when we will move ahead in a way that grants sovereignty to the people of Wales.

Many of the amendments that I have discussed so far were recommended by the Silk commission, as I mentioned previously. Other amendments in the group include amendment 85, which would remove prostitution from the list of reserved powers; amendment 117, which would remove the reservation of knives; and amendment 109, which would remove the reservation of abortion, to bring Wales into line with Scotland and Northern Ireland. Again, I challenge the Secretary of State to stand up and tell us why he voted for Scotland to have those powers, but is now telling us in Wales that we cannot have equivalent powers.

Amendment 155 is distinct in that it seeks to clarify a reservation contained in schedule 7A, and not to omit it entirely. The amendment would clarify a reserved matter “the Crown Prosecution Service”, rather than the broader term “prosecutors”, as currently drafted. This amendment is crucial, as the existing wording of the schedule could prohibit Assembly legislation from enabling devolved authorities, such as local authorities and Natural Resources Wales, to prosecute. I hope that the Government will take note of this distinction and amend the schedule accordingly.

Amendment 156 would remove the necessity test in relation to the law on reserved matters. The test of necessity is objectionable on grounds of clarity and workability, as it is capable of a number of different interpretations. One possible interpretation is extremely restrictive and would represent a reduction in the Assembly’s current competence. The difference between a “reserved matter” and the “law on reserved matters” is explained in paragraphs 409 to 413 and 414 of the explanatory notes to the Bill.

The notes give the example of an Assembly Bill which related entirely to planning, which is not a reserved matter, but which modified a provision of a UK Act concerning telecommunications. That modification might be within the Assembly’s competence, as its purpose might relate entirely to planning, and so it would meet the test set out in new section 108A(6) of the Government of Wales Act 2006, inserted by clause 3. However, by modifying a provision of a UK Act of Parliament, which concerned a reserved matter, it would modify the “law on reserved matters”. The Assembly should be able to do so in a purely ancillary way, without also having to show that the modification made has “no greater effect…than is necessary”.

An equivalent to the Bill provision is contained in the Scotland Act 1998. However, in the context of the Scottish devolution settlement, it is much less restrictive, as the Scottish Parliament has competence over considerably greater fields, including, of course, justice matters, and the Scottish system of civil and criminal law. Therefore, what might appear to be wider latitude for the Assembly would in practice still amount to narrower competence than that of the Scottish Parliament.

Amendment 157 would remove the criminal law restriction in paragraph 4 of schedule 7B and replace it with a restriction which provides that the Assembly cannot modify criminal law unless that is for a purpose other than a reserved purpose. It reflects the Assembly’s current competence—that is, the criminal law is a silent subject, and the Assembly can modify the criminal law if it relates to a devolved subject, or if the modification is ancillary. The Assembly, therefore, could not modify the criminal law if it was for a reserved purpose, thus protecting the criminal law around the 200 or so reservations in the Bill. The amendment would also make it clear that the Assembly could not modify the criminal law for its own sake: there must be a devolved purpose behind the modification of the criminal law. It would align the criminal law restriction with the private law restriction in paragraph 3 of schedule 7B. This would provide consistency and clarity.

I have already spoken of my party’s dismay that the Bill threatens in places to dilute, rather than augment, the legislative competence of the Assembly. In this vein, a number of the amendments in this group seek to clarify the Assembly’s powers in relation to its internal functions, as well as its overall competence to legislate. Amendments 148 and 149 seek to restore the Assembly’s competence closer to its current level. Currently, the Assembly is able to affect, in a minor way, matters that are listed as exceptions from competence in schedule 7 to the Government of Wales Act 2006. Most of these exceptions have been converted into reservations in the proposed new settlement—for example, consumer protection. However, under the new settlement, the Assembly would have no competence to legislate in a way that touches on reserved matters at all.

The Assembly can currently legislate in relation to “silent subjects”—that is, topics that are not listed either as subjects of competence, or as exceptions from competence, in schedule 7 to GOWA. The Assembly
can do so only where it is also legislating on a subject that is specifically devolved by schedule 7. Many of these silent subjects—for example, employment rights and duties—have been moved to Westminster. The amendment would restore the Assembly’s competence to affect those topics in a purely ancillary way. However, that ancillary competence would still be narrower than the Assembly’s present competence to legislate on “silent subjects” when that legislation also relates to expressly devolved subjects.

In an attempt to allow the aforementioned institution to have control and oversight over its own legislation, amendment 6 would give the Assembly the power to consolidate, in both English and Welsh, the statutes containing the current constitutional settlement affecting Wales. No matter what our position on empowering the Assembly, I am sure we can all agree that it is important, whatever settlement we have, that that settlement is easily understood. It is disappointing that this Bill does not consolidate all existing legislation, but the amendment would allow the National Assembly to do that, in the interests of clarity. It would not allow the National Assembly to go beyond current legislation and broaden its competence.

Amendments 34 to 37 would amend paragraph 7 of schedule 2, which sets out the sections of the Government of Wales Act 2006 which the Assembly will have competence to modify. Paragraph 7(2)(d) specifically refers to those sections of part 5 of the 2006 Act which are amendable without restriction. As it stands, this does not include the ability to amend sections 120(1) or 124(3) of the Government of Wales Act 2006 which provide for “relevant persons”—otherwise known as “direct funded bodies”—which receive funding directly from the Welsh consolidated fund. That means, for example, the Welsh Government, the Assembly Commission, the Auditor General and the public services ombudsman for Wales.

Amendments 35 and 36 would allow the Assembly competence to add to, but not remove from, the list of “relevant persons”. It would allow it to enable a body that is independent of the Welsh Government also to be financially independent where that is deemed appropriate. Any use of such competence to add to the “relevant persons” would require an Act of the Assembly.

Paragraph 7 of schedule 2 provides that the remaining provisions of part 5 of the Government of Wales Act 2006 are amendable where the amendment is incidental to or consequential on a provision of an Act of the Assembly relating to budgetary procedures, and the Secretary of State consents to that amendment. I see no reason why the consent of the Secretary of State should be required to an amendment that will have no impact beyond the Assembly’s financial procedures, so amendment 37 removes that requirement.

On the remaining amendments in this group tabled in my name and the names of my hon. Friends, as I have already said, the majority of these amendments highlight areas of competence that are devolved to the Scottish Parliament. Consequently, I shall list a number of amendments: 84, 87, 88, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 97, 98, 106 and 103. I give the amendment numbers for a reason. It feels like the Secretary of State is allowing Whitehall to pick and choose the powers it wants to hold on to. We argue strongly that he must draw up a list of reservations based on principles. These reservations make no practical sense and the absence of principle is obvious. They range from the reservation of dangerous dogs to hovercraft, sports grounds and health and safety. We need a reason why those areas should be reserved.

In addition, there are amendments 105, 107, 104, 112, 113 and 89, which is on Sunday trading and safeguards the long-standing tradition in Wales of protecting shop workers’ terms and conditions, and amendments 114 and 115. Over and above that, Plaid Cymru has long argued that Department for Work and Pensions functions should be devolved to the Assembly. Thus amendment 100 would devolve all working age benefits that are to be replaced by universal credit and any benefit that is introduced to replace universal credit. Amendments 101, 102, 108 and 99 all relate to those areas of DWP functions that we have long argued should be devolved.

Amendments 96, 61 to 63 and 69 deal with the newly created Welsh harbours of “reserved trust ports”. Once again, this creation has no justification. A port will now be devolved unless it has a turnover of above a certain threshold. Again, that is the case not for Scotland or Northern Ireland, but only for Wales. It is yet another example of Westminster holding on to as much power as possible while appearing to be offering significant devolution. Once again, I challenge the Secretary of State to tell us why this is necessary in Wales, when he voted to devolve full control to Scotland.

Amendment 2 is consequential on new clause 1, which seeks to devolve Executive and legislative competence of the Crown estate in Wales to the Welsh Government and the National Assembly for Wales, as has been done in Scotland. New clause 7 would devolve general legislative competence in respect of agricultural, aquacultural and fisheries levies. Again, those are areas that Plaid Cymru has long argued should be devolved to the National Assembly.

Before I come to a close, I wish to note concerns expressed to me by the Welsh language commissioner regarding the Bill’s potential effect on the National Assembly’s powers to legislate in matters concerning the Welsh language. A possible effect of schedule 2 is that the National Assembly, should it wish to legislate for the Welsh language, would require the consent of the relevant UK Minister to confer, impose, modify or remove within that legislation the Welsh language functions of Ministers of the Crown, Government Departments and other reserved authorities. Under the current settlement, that ministerial consent is required only when legislatively to impose Welsh language functions on Ministers of the Crown. The ministerial consent provisions of the Wales Bill in relation to the Welsh language would appear to be applicable to a wider range of persons than is currently the case, and would thus be more restrictive. I hope that that can be considered in the later stages of the Bill.

The amendments in this group should not be considered as mere separate, distinct “tweaks” to the Wales Bill. Rather, we present them as a collection of amendments, which, by their sheer number, make evident the many ways in which the current proposed legislation is deficient. No justification has been given by the Government as to why these many policy areas have been reserved, and no justification has been given as to why the Welsh Assembly should not be granted the same competence as the Scottish Parliament in these areas.
In the absence of these justifications, I respectfully urge the Government to amend their bill, and to present a bolder version of this legislation. This Government should not miss the opportunity to enable the Welsh Assembly to grow in competence and confidence. With responsibility comes capability. The Senedd should be given the power to legislate in these areas. I commend the amendments to the Committee.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): Although I have misgivings about a number of elements of this Bill, I wish to speak very briefly on amendment 161, which addresses the proposed transfer of powers over national speed limits from Westminster to Cardiff Bay. I have already spoken about this issue during the pre-legislative scrutiny of the Welsh Affairs Committee and also at the Welsh Grand Committee.

To be clear, the power to set specific speed limits, such as 20 mph zones outside schools, or 40 mph or 50 mph zones as preferred for reasons of safety, quite rightly already lies with local authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government. As it stands, the Wales Bill proposes transferring powers over national speed limits. Those include 30 mph speed limits in built-up areas and 60 mph limits in non-built-up areas, and of course a 70 mph limit on dual carriageways and motorways. In my mind, those are etched on the brains of all of us via the Highway Code, and, in the absence of any signage, they are usually clear, based on the type of road.

We all live on a small island, and more than 200 roads straddle the England and Wales border. In the case of many smaller roads, the border is not, at present, marked by any signage at all. In some cases, the border cuts across housing estate roads, or even runs lengthwise along roads and splits them in half. Roads across the UK are essentially subject to the same safety criteria as vehicles. Taking all that into account, it is clear to me that the prospect of additional different national speed limits in England and Wales simply would be neither desirable nor realistic.

Hywel Williams: The hon. Gentleman describes the complexity of the border in some areas, but does he have no confidence in the Welsh Assembly to administer different speed limits sensibly?

Dr Davies: It is perfectly possible that it can be done, but I just do not see the point. It would create extra confusion, and there would be a plethora of signs at the border where currently there is none. There would also have to be a huge information exercise, which would, in many cases, fail to get to the users of those roads.

Welsh devolution was meant to improve the lives of people, but it is very difficult to see how the devolution of a national speed limit, among other items in the Bill, would bring that about. It surely needs to be accepted that this is a matter most sensibly overseen at UK level. I respectfully urge the Government to reconsider.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure, Mr Hoyle, to serve under your chairmanship today.

I wish to speak specifically in support of amendment 124 in the name of my right hon. and hon. Friends. I know that a number of Members wished to add their name to the amendment. It does not look as though that has been done, so I wanted to make it clear that it has my full support.

The amendment relates to the experience that many of us had during the passage of the Trade Union Bill. We had extensive discussions around the relative competence of devolved Administrations and the UK Government over trade union and industrial relations and employment matters that related to devolved public services. I want to draw a very clear distinction here. I am not in favour of having some sort of potential beggar thy neighbour approach on employment and industrial relations across these islands. It is important that there are common standards and provisions that do not go into some sort of race to the bottom. I also believe in the Welsh Government and the Welsh Assembly having full power over the partnerships and industrial relations practices that they choose to pursue in areas where there is clear devolved competence such as in the public services, particularly in health and education, but also in other areas.

During the passage of the Bill, the Government regularly used the excuse that they were not interested in the positions of the Welsh Government, the Scottish Government or other Governments on issues such as check-off and facility time in the public services because those were exclusively reserved. However, the Welsh Government, the Scottish Government and others made it clear that they did not believe that this Parliament and the UK Government had full legislative competence in those areas, particularly in relation to the administration of public services.

That is crucial, because the Welsh Labour Government have pursued a different approach to industrial relations, which has led to an absence of some of the strikes and industrial disputes we have seen in other parts of the UK, and we had a clear example in the health service. The Welsh Government have taken a sensible partnership approach with the trade unions and a sensible approach to issues such as facility time and check-off. They have properly recognised the importance of those things, and particularly of partnership working, as opposed to the confrontational approach taken by the Government in Westminster at various points, and I would not want to see that undermined in any way.

Amendment 124 therefore makes it clear that the Assembly would retain its legislative competence over terms and conditions of service for employees in the devolved public services and over industrial relations in those services. That is entirely reasonable. This is not about a complete devolution of these issues—it is important that we retain common standards—but about taking a sensible approach and allowing the Assembly to handle relationships in, for example, the Welsh NHS, our schools and our further education institutions in the more positive and constructive way they have done.

The amendment would also enable the Welsh Government to take the action they clearly want to, without people resorting to the courts, as we have seen on other matters. The UK Government famously took the Welsh Government to court over the Agricultural Wages Board, which was a wholly foolish decision. The Welsh Government were trying to take a different approach—the right approach—but the Government wanted to waste tens of thousands of pounds of taxpayers’ money attempting to sue the Welsh Government. That is why, in areas such as this, we have to have a clear
distinction in legislation, and why we should not attempt to hamstring devolved Administrations in areas where they have clear competence. In that way, we can avoid the resort to the courts and the expending of public money that would otherwise occur.

The amendment has the support of many of the trade unions in Wales, which have practised the different type of industrial relations I described, and I declare my interest as a proud member of the GMB, which is very supportive of the amendment. I hope the Government will accept that there is a clear distinction here and that there is a clear place for these responsibilities in relation to the public services where Wales has taken a different route. I therefore urge the Government to accept the amendment.

Mr Mark Williams: It is good to have this opportunity to say a few words about this mammoth group of amendments. I want to speak in support of a range of amendments to schedule 1 that remove certain reservations. I endorse amendment 83, on policing; amendment 112, on antischolarship; amendment 84, on dangerous dogs; amendment 85, on prostitution; amendment 86, on the rehabilitation of offenders; amendment 117, on knives; amendment 123, on entertainment and late-night refreshment; amendment 116, on licensing; amendment 87, on the sale and supply of alcohol; the amendments on water and sewerage; amendment 89, on Sunday trading; amendment 90, on electricity; amendment 91, on coal; amendment 92, on heating and cooling; amendment 93, on energy conservation; amendment 94, on road transport; amendment 161, on speed limits; amendment 95, on rail services; amendment 141, on trust ports; amendment 97, on coastguards; amendment 98, on hovercraft; amendment 114, on the Children’s Commissioner; amendment 115, on teachers’ pay; amendment 113, on time; and amendment 112, on equal opportunities.

What I last read out of the list of reservations in the Welsh Grand Committee, when we had the ill-fated draft Bill, it was somewhat longer, and I was saved from hyperventilation only by the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), who helped me out. The Government should therefore be praised and congratulated to a small degree on reducing the length of the list of reservations, which is what the Select Committee said they should do.

I will not go too much into the specifics of the amendments, other than to say that I still question whether there was a write-around to various Departments. Who was calling the shots on the different subjects? Was it the former Secretary of State and his team? Was it our friends in the Assembly Government? Was it officials and Ministers in other Departments? Like my neighbours from Plaid Cymru, I would like to see the justification for the reservation list as it has been presented.

I was fully aware of the St David’s process. We looked through Silk systematically, and we looked at every one of Silk’s recommendations. If there was a consensus between the four parties, we would proceed; if there was not, we would not. However, in either eventuality, officials would go away and talk to Departments, so my hunch—my suspicion—is that certain Departments were involved, not least the Department of Justice, given the discussions we had when we previously sat in Committee on a distinct or separate jurisdiction, and it is great to hear that, on Report, we will be discussing the need for a distinct jurisdiction in a way we did not then.

If these powers—these reservations—were controlled in Wales, would that mean the unravelling of our constitutional arrangement? Would it mean the end of the Union if we devolved the power over hovercraft, time or the Children’s Commissioner? Should there not be a principle—I suggest there should be—that if something is good enough to be devolved to Northern Ireland and Scotland, it should be devolved to Wales as well? Better still, perhaps we should have started from the principle that all powers are devolved and that it is the duty of the Wales Office and Westminster to argue the case for retaining them to Westminster. Whitehall would not have had a difficult time—from some of us at least, and I part company with my friends in Plaid Cymru on this—convincing us that defence should be reserved. However, I would love to hear the argument for why most of these other powers are still being reserved to this place.

Many of these items were referred to in Silk—for instance, ports and their development, harbour orders and the oversight of trust ports. There is no mention in Silk of reserved ports at Milford Haven. Silk also talked about speed limits and drink-driving limits. I respect those hon. Members who moved amendment 161, but they should have more faith in their Front Benchers, in the Department for Transport and, indeed, in our friends in the Cynulliad. I remember sitting, as the Liberal, in the St David’s day discussions at Gwydyr House, and the Conservatives, the Labour party and Plaid Cymru were all united on the Government’s suggestion. Members must have more faith in members of their own parties.

Silk talked about water and sewerage. He asserted that they should be devolved, but that the boundary for legislative competence should be aligned with the national boundary—a tall order indeed. He called for further consideration of the practical issues of alignment, with particular interest given to the interests of consumers, and for discussions with the regulator, consumer representatives, water companies and both Governments. When we discussed these matters, it was agreed that, to get consensus between the four parties, a joint Government water and sewerage devolution board would be established to consider aligning legislative competence with the national border. That work has now concluded, and I would be grateful to hear the Government’s interpretation of the conclusions. Is it not true that the conclusions that have been reached could be enacted with minimal impact on the consumers of water and sewerage services? Why, therefore, have this reservation?

I want to talk specifically about teachers’ pay and conditions. The issue is dear to my heart because I was a teacher before coming to this place. I taught in England and in the great county of Powys—indeed, I taught in the great constituency of Brecon and Radnorshire, at an excellent school called Ysgol Llangorse. I had a seamless move across the border from England into Wales, and I was able to benefit from remaining on the same teaching pay spine—it must be said that I had a bit of a promotion at Llangorse, for which I was very grateful—with the same conditions. I would also say, although not to infuriate friends on the Conservative Benches, that I remain a very proud member of NASUWT and pay my subs regularly.

6.30 pm

For some, those arrangements might be a case for retaining the status quo. Silk acknowledged, as have the Welsh Government—this is now getting a little dated,
but it was relevant then and is relevant now—that teachers’ pay and conditions are an integral aspect of the school system and should be closely related to the devolved education function. However, time has moved on with regard to the English and Welsh education systems. As the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) said—I think we might have a brief from the same source, but this is a valid point, so I will repeat it—priorities in Wales are different. The national pay systems and structures were established to support a different employment model. There is now not even consistency within England as academisation means that schools are not required to comply in the same way with the schoolteachers’ pay and conditions document. We also operate different professional registration standards. There is still a General Teaching Council for Wales—I still send off my £35 a year to be a member—but the General Teaching Council for England no longer exists. The freedom not to comply with the professional registration standards when working in academies in England does not operate in Welsh maintained schools. That all means that when the School Teachers Review Body reports each year, it reports on different things, reflecting an educational context that is not relevant to Wales. We need to recognise that changing policy in England means that the role of the School Teachers Review Body is diminishing in Wales.

Welsh Ministers need the capacity to deal with these issues. It is, very occasionally, refreshing to have brief opportunities to talk about the delivery of policy. As a former teacher, I suppose I should rely on the great Kirsty Williams, my colleague in the Cynulliad, to deliver on these matters. However, there are practical problems. The difficulty of recruiting headteachers in rural Wales and of keeping staff in village schools represents a real challenge. If we permit the National Assembly to have powers on teachers’ pay and conditions, it can address some of these concerns—if, of course, sufficient resources go to Wales as well. Silk was clear that teachers’ pay and conditions must be devolved to the National Assembly, although the issue of pensions stays here. That is why it is so important to remove, through amendment 115, the reservation in section N9 in proposed new schedule 7A.

The issue of time will still be reserved to this place. Those who have read the Bill from cover to cover will have seen, tucked away in section N4, the reservation on time: the Assembly Government will have no capacity to change:

“Timescales, time zones… the calendar… the date of Easter” and the subject matter of the Summer Time Act 1972, as if there was ever a call to change those things. Section N4 also refers to bank holidays. The Committee may or may not recall—probably not; attendance was not great on St David’s day this year—that I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to devolve responsibility for bank holidays to the National Assembly. I have probably exchanged views with most Members on this subject, not least the Under-Secretary during a Westminster Hall debate some time ago. There are different views about this that will lead to a spirited debate, but the essential principle is that the designation of St David’s day as a bank holiday should be a matter not for us here, but for our colleagues in the Assembly. We now, unfortunately, have five parties in the National Assembly, but when there were four—the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives, Labour, and Plaid Cymru—all endorsed the call for the Assembly to have that power.

Mr David Jones: As a matter of pure interest, which of the current bank holidays would the hon. Gentleman propose to dispense with in order to create one on St David’s day?

Mr Williams: I remember the right hon. Gentleman making that point in a previous Westminster Hall debate. I am not going to make that judgment because it is for the National Assembly. When the Under-Secretary responded to my debate, he talked about a review, but regrettably its results were parked in the proverbial long grass and are now in a cul-de-sac. This is a matter not for me, the right hon. Gentleman or the rest of us sitting on these green Benches, but for colleagues and friends in the Cynulliad.

Mr Jones: I recall that on the previous occasion this was considered, any change to the bank holidays proved deeply unpopular with the tourist industry in Wales.

Mr Williams: Without digging into the depths of the argument, I have made the position clear. Let the tourist industry make its representations to Ministers in our Cynulliad in Cardiff, not here. Let us not sit here, viceroy-like, dictating to the National Assembly. We should let the Assembly have that discussion with the tourist operatives, with the responsible Minister engaged with them, and then it can make the decision. It is a decision not for the right hon. Gentleman and me, but for our friends in the Assembly. That is what devolution means.

I want briefly to talk about policing. Silk said that: “policing and related areas of community safety and crime prevention should be devolved”.

I must describe—I do not know whether Chatham House rules applied to our discussions in Gwydyr House, but they probably did—the genuine shock and anguish that was felt when we reported back on this matter to our National Assembly colleagues. Two of us from each party were sitting in an office somewhere in this House that I had never been to where big board meetings happen. There was shock and dismay that matters of youth justice were not, as recommended by the Silk commission, followed through in the St David’s day document. I understand how the Government have reached this position, and how the process was set in train when they talked to their colleagues in the Ministry of Justice, but that does not negate the case. Youth justice, of all issues, given its links between education, skills and health as part of rehabilitation, was not followed through in a devolutionary way.

I will now conclude my remarks, although such is the list of reservations that we could go on for hours. I hope that the Minister will respond to some of the concerns that many of us still have about the list, slightly shortened though it is.

Susan Elan Jones: One could talk about a lot of aspects in the Bill, as we know, because at one time or another most of us have done so. I will therefore concentrate on one particular amendment: amendment 123, which has been signed by my hon. Friend the shadow
Secretary of State and others, which concerns the devolution of licensing of the provision of entertainment and late-night refreshments, and the sale and supply of alcohol.

My hon. Friend is a great scholar of Welsh history, so I am surprised that he did not mention that the first Wales-only legislation came with the Sunday Closing (Wales) Act 1881. That means that there is real sense of history behind this amendment. Most of us would agree that it makes perfect sense to devolve such provisions to the Assembly’s legislative competence so I, for one, strongly support the amendment. We must recognise that there needs to be a greater debate about this whole subject, because alcohol abuse has relevance to health services as well as local government services. We are not living in the days of the 1881 Act, following which areas voted on whether to be wet or dry. People from dry areas would often travel a little further along the lanes to get to a wet area. However, we are now dealing with problems of alcohol abuse and of pre-loading in many of our communities. Years ago, the mudiad dirwest—the Welsh temperance movement—would often decry other cultures and say, “Fancy the French—they give wine to their children!” In reality, alcohol and food have always gone together naturally in many continental cultures, but that is not the case with pre-loading. We need to think about that very seriously indeed.

We also need to consider our rural areas. I am sure that all of us take very seriously issues relating to drink or drug-driving. Those of us who represent rural and semi-rural areas will know from talking to our constituents and others that some people still take chances on country roads and drive when they are above the legal limit. I appreciate that the culture has changed for the better in many ways and that fewer people do that, but it is still a problem in many of our rural communities. Frankly, if someone in a car finds themselves on a narrow single lane faced by a drink-driver, their chances of survival are fairly low.

Devolving the relevant powers would affect how we consider health, social care and local government provision. Great problems are connected to alcohol and drug abuse. I do not wish to sound like a member of the Welsh football team. The Prime Minister has already congratulated them, and it is a pleasure for me to do so as Secretary of State for Wales.

The amendments go to the heart of the new devolution settlement for Wales that the Bill puts in place. Clause 3 and schedules 1 and 2 insert new section 108A and new schedules 7A and 7B into the Government of Wales Act 2006 to provide for a reserved powers model of Welsh devolution. The Bill devolves significant new powers and will enable the Welsh Government and Assembly Members to legislate on the things that really matter to Wales.

Clause 3 sets out the parameters of the legislative competence of the Assembly under the reserved powers model. An Act of the Assembly will be outside competence—it therefore will not be law—if it falls foul of any one of the five tests set out in paragraphs (a) to (e) of new section 108A(2). I will first say something about how it is intended that each of those tests will work before turning to the proposed amendments to the clause.

The five tests are separate and independent assessments, each of which must be satisfied for a provision to be within competence. The first test is that an Assembly Act provision cannot form part of a legal jurisdiction other than that of England and Wales. We debated many aspects of that during our first day in Committee.

Test 2 is that an Assembly Act provision cannot apply “otherwise than in relation to Wales”.

There is an exception to that prohibition, however, because new section 108A(3) states that an Assembly Act provision can apply beyond Wales, but only when it is ancillary to a provision that is within competence and if there is no greater effect beyond Wales than is necessary to give effect to that provision. It is worth noting that we have used the word “ancillary” as shorthand for the Assembly’s existing enforcement and consequential-type powers under section 108(5) of the Government of Wales Act 2006.

6.45 pm

In the context of the draft Wales Bill, there was much debate about the words “necessity test”. Let me be clear that “necessary” does not mean that there would only ever be one option that would satisfy that test. There could be a number of different options to achieve the same policy objective, all of which could satisfy the requirement not to have effects beyond Wales that are more than necessary.

Test 3 is that an Assembly Act provision must not relate to a reserved matter listed in proposed new schedule 7A, which we will come to later. The question of whether an Assembly Act provision relates to a reserved matter is to be interpreted by reference to the purpose of the provision, having regard to, among other things, the effect in all the circumstances set out in section 108A(6). The test is the same as that which currently applies in the context of the conferred powers model. It has become known as the “purpose test”.

Let me explain the technical issues that I have highlighted. Although the policy documents that give rise to an Assembly Bill may be relevant in determining its purpose, the essential question is what the Bill provision is seeking to achieve and what effect the provision has in legal, practical and policy terms. In other words, it will not be enough for the Welsh Government simply to assert the purpose of the provision. Why it is being enacted and what it actually does is what is really relevant in determining its purpose and, ultimately, whether an Assembly Act provision is within the Assembly’s legislative competence under test 3.

Test 4 is that an Assembly Act provision must not breach any of the restrictions in new schedule 7B, which I shall say more about in a moment. Finally, test 5 is the requirement that the Assembly Act provision must comply with the European convention on human rights and EU law. Those five tests represent clear, proportionate and
reasonably parameters on the Assembly’s legislative competence, and it is important that I have put them on the record.

Liz Saville Roberts: I appreciate that the right hon. Gentleman has listed a number of tests, but does he agree that, for them to be justifications in a reserved power model, we should see how the reservations apply to each area?

Alun Cairns: I will cover those points, but I have sought to underline the importance of the tests because they are so fundamental to the reserved powers model. Of course, the reservations will be equally fundamental. The hon. Lady mentioned a significant number of them. As I make progress, I will cover many of the points she made and invite her to intervene then.

Amendments 118 and 119, tabled by the main Opposition party, and Plaid Cymru’s amendments 148 and 149 seek to broaden the Assembly’s competence significantly by enabling it to legislate in relation to reserved matters so long as the provision is ancillary to a provision on a devolved matter. These amendments would drive a coach and horses through the key principle underpinning the new model, which is a clear boundary between what is devolved and what is reserved. They would give the Assembly the power to make unfettered changes to reserved matters such as the justice system, which we debated in detail last week, provided only that some connection to a devolved provision was established. What is more, they are simply not needed. We want to ensure that the Assembly can enforce its legislation and make it effective. We provide for this in paragraphs 1 and 2 of new schedule 7B by enabling the Assembly to modify the law on reserved matters. This is suitable to ensure that the Assembly’s devolved provisions can be enforced without compromising the principle of reserved matters.

I turn now to the proposed new schedule 7A to the Government of Wales Act, which sets out the reserved matters, referred to in general in the legislation as the “reservations”. These matters must be seen through the prism of the purpose test. A reservation is a succinct description of the subject area covered. It includes reserved authorities carrying out functions relating to that subject and criminal offences relating to that subject.

The general reservations in part 1 of the new schedule reserve the fundamental tenets of the constitution: the Crown, the civil service, defence and the armed forces, the regulation of political parties, and foreign affairs. As a single legal jurisdiction operates in England and Wales, we also reserve matters such as courts and non-devolved tribunals, judges, and civil and criminal proceedings. However, we have made appropriate exceptions to these reservations to enable the Assembly to exercise devolved functions. For example, the Assembly can confer devolved functions on the courts or provide for appeals from devolved tribunals to reserved tribunals.

Amendment 6, tabled by Plaid Cymru, seeks to modify these core reservations by allowing the Assembly to consolidate the constitutional arrangements for Wales. It surely must be a fundamental principle that the UK’s constitutional arrangements, including Parliament’s authority to devolve its own powers, are reserved. We have a constitutional settlement for Wales, the Government of Wales Act 2006 as amended, and amendment 6 is simply not necessary.

Part 2 lists the specific reservations. We want there to be no doubt where the boundary of the Assembly’s legislative competence lies. The list is lengthy because it is quite specific in its reservations and provides exceptions to those reservations. Previously, in the draft, there were some broad headlines, but the current Bill is far more specific, which necessitates further detail on what is included.

Jonathan Edwards: During this afternoon’s debate, the Secretary of State has been challenged on many of the reservations listed in part 2. In the interests of transparency, and before we get to the remaining stages of the Bill, will he commit the Wales Office to publishing a document outlining why each reservation has been made?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Member is aware that I have an open style and am happy to maintain dialogue and work with all opposition parties, as well as with the Welsh Government, in seeking to come to an accommodation. However, hovercrafts, for example, have been highlighted a couple of times. That reservation relates to technical standards and is about a distinct class of transport, such as ships in relation to shipping and planes in relation to aviation. Therefore, although, on the face of it, one might ask what the purpose of a reservation is, very often there are technical issues well beyond that. I am happy to continue a dialogue in that respect, as we continue to do with the Welsh Government.

Paul Flynn: Will the right hon. Gentleman consider breaking the pattern we have had of passing Wales Bills and, then, five years later, coming back to try to undo the damage we have done with the previous Bill? Will he accept the spirit of unanimity on this side of the Committee when we point out the problem with many of these reservations? Take, for instance, the reservation on dangerous dogs, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams). If there is any issue on which this Parliament has proved its legislative incompetence over the years it is the Dangerous Dog Act 1991. That is an example of how not to legislate. Wales could do better perhaps.

Alun Cairns: The hon. Member is well aware that 90% of the Welsh population live within 50 miles of the border between England and Wales. Clearly, some reservations are sensible so that people can walk their dogs across that boundary; otherwise, it could lead to significant complications. The hon. Member raised that specific practical example, and I am happy to maintain the dialogue on that.

Mr Hoyle, you would not believe it, but the vast majority of reservations are not contentious. They simply reflect those areas of policy that are best legislated on a Wales basis or at a UK level, and the further powers that are being devolved in the Bill. Constructive discussions on the reservations will continue between the UK Government and the Welsh Government, and, happily, with Opposition Members. I recognise that some reservations reflect the difference in policy between us. Others are subject to further detailed discussions, which I am happy to continue. In the context of the purpose test, the list of reservations before us today will ensure greater clarity and certainty in determining what is within the competence of the Assembly and what is not.

I turn now to the amendments to schedule 1.
Hywel Williams: The Secretary of State says with a flourish and extreme confidence that the list of reservations is sensible. If so, why is he so reticent about publishing his reasoning? He asserts, but he does not explain.

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman will know that I am happy to continue open dialogues. As Secretary of State, that is the style I have sought to use, to build on that set by my predecessor. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will want to continue working in such an open and constructive way.

Jonathan Edwards: Will the Minister give way?

Alun Cairns: I would like to make further progress, if I may.

A whole host of amendments have been tabled in relation to policing and justice. The St David’s day process found no consensus to devolve the criminal justice system in Wales. The Government gave a clear manifesto commitment that policing and criminal justice will remain reserved. In our first day in Committee last week, I made clear the Government’s commitment to maintain the single legal jurisdiction of England and Wales. Crime, public order and policing are inextricably linked to the criminal justice system. There already exists an All Wales Criminal Justice Board, which consults fully with the Welsh Government and extends to prison provision. The Welsh Government are also in regular dialogue with the National Offender Management Service about its functions.

Amendment 116, tabled by Plaid Cymru, and amendment 87, tabled by Labour, seek to remove the reservations for late-night entertainment and alcohol licensing respectively. There was much debate within this group surrounding this. The Government consider both subjects to be closely connected to policing and maintaining public order. Given that policing and criminal justice remain reserved matters, late-night entertainment and alcohol licensing should also be reserved under the principle that has been established.

Amendment 155, tabled by Plaid Cymru, seeks to reserve “the Crown Prosecution Service” rather than “prosecutors” in the general reservation on the single legal jurisdiction. There is no intention to prevent the Assembly from continuing to specify, devolved prosecutors for devolved offences in the legislation. The reservation of prosecutors would not prevent the Assembly from legislating to, for example, make local authorities in Wales the prosecuting authority for particular devolved offences, as was highlighted by the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). I agree, however, with the underlying policy intention of the amendment and will consider further, before Report, whether the reservation of prosecutors should be modified. I am happy to return to this at that stage.

Government amendments 53 to 58, tabled in my name, seek to put Wales in the same position as Scotland in respect of the reservations in C5, which reserves all prohibition and regulation of imports and exports in and out of the United Kingdom. It does, however, allow the Assembly to control movements of certain things, such as plants, animals, foods and fertilisers, for specified purposes. The amendments seek to put the Assembly in the same position as the Scottish Parliament by extending its competence to regulate movement of these things both within Wales and in and out of Wales.

Significant attention has been given to transport reservations, with a number of amendments being tabled by both Plaid Cymru and the Labour party. The transport reservations were subject to close scrutiny when the Bill was at a draft stage, and there is no basis on which to devolve railway services, coastguard services or aspects of road transport, as the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) proposes. It is not what the Silk commission recommended, and my focus has been on delivering powers for a purpose.

7 pm

The amendments are also designed to remove the reservation of reserved trust ports, on which there has been further debate. The Bill devolves responsibility for all ports in Wales other than the largest, nationally significant trust ports. It applies a threshold in order to define reserved trust ports in Wales. In consequence, Milford Haven is expected to be the sole reserved trust port in Wales. Milford Haven is one of the UK’s largest leading energy ports, with around 62% of the nation’s liquefied natural gas passing through it, and it plays a crucial national role in securing the nation’s energy supplies. It is right that it should be a reserved trust port. That is in the interests of the United Kingdom and in the interests of Wales.

Amendment 161, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), is designed to move in the other direction by reserving speed limits and road traffic signs. The devolution of speed limits was a Silk commission recommendation, and there is consensus under the St David’s day process to proceed with its implementation. Traffic signs are devolved in Scotland following the Smith agreement and, given the wider competence of the Assembly and Welsh Ministers in relation to highways and transport matters, it is sensible to devolve responsibility for them to Wales.

Mr David Jones: The Secretary of State mentioned the Silk commission’s recommendations, but he will recall that I asked for the rationale. I wonder whether he could explain it, please.

Alun Cairns: I am happy to explain that given that local authorities already have the power to vary speed limits, it is a logical, sensible extension to give further powers to the Welsh Government in this area.

Time does not permit me to address in detail all the remaining amendments to schedule 1. That is in part because hon. Members from Plaid Cymru seem to seek the devolution of just about everything, and they seem to want to reverse the principles on which the Bill is based. I am pursuing a pragmatic, practical approach as we amend and develop the Bill, so I reject the amendments to devolve Sunday trading, the generation, transmission, distribution and supply of electricity, coal, heat and cooling networks, energy conservation, working-age benefits, child benefit, guardians allowance, most employment and industrial relations, employment support programmes, abortion, health and safety, broadcasting, safety at sports grounds, equal opportunities, bank holidays and the Children’s Commissioner.

Amendment 124, which was tabled by the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), seeks to carve out from the employment reservation terms and conditions of employment in relation to Wales public authorities. The Government believe strongly that the underlying legislative
framework of rights and responsibilities in the workplace must be reserved for the labour market to work most effectively across Great Britain.

**Stephen Doughty:** Does the Secretary of State accept that, as a Minister told me during proceedings on the Trade Union Bill, the reserved powers granted under the legislation effectively allow any Minister in the UK Government to undermine a partnership or industrial relations decision made by a Welsh Minister in the running of the Welsh NHS or the education service, for example?

**Alun Cairns:** The hon. Gentleman will be familiar with the legislative background of the Government of Wales Act 2006, and the Bill seeks to expand on the 2006 Act in relation to employment rights. There was no intention in that Act to devolve those purposes, and we have continued the principle that was well established by the previous Labour Government.

I shall deal with amendments on three further areas. First, in relation to amendment 88, which was tabled by members of Plaid Cymru, and amendments 127 to 129 and new clause 10, the Government are considering the conclusions of the joint Governments’ programme board in relation to the Silk recommendations on water and sewerage. The joint committee reported only a couple of weeks ago, and it is only appropriate that the Government give proper, full consideration to that report. I hope that we can find a consensus among the Welsh Government and the opposition parties on a way forward, but there are a whole range of technical issues that need further consideration.

Secondly, in response to amendment 107, I assure the hon. Member for Arfon that the Assembly will have the competence to legislate in relation to party election broadcasts at Assembly and local government elections in Wales. Party political broadcasts are considered to be part of the conduct of elections, and there is no need to modify the broadcasting reservation to achieve that. Thirdly, on amendment 115, which relates to teachers’ pay, I am in principle in favour of devolving teachers’ pay and conditions, but there is a case for further discussions between the UK Government and the Welsh Government about how that can best be achieved.

Finally, new clause 1 and consequential amendment 2 are intended to devolve the management functions of the Crown Estate commissioners in relation to Wales to Welsh Ministers or to a person who is nominated by them. That broadly reflects the provisions in the Scotland Act 2016. The devolution of the Crown Estate in Scotland was recommended by cross-party consensus in the Smith agreement but, as hon. Members know, the St David’s day process found no similar consensus in respect of Wales.

Paragraph 1 of proposed new schedule 7B to the Government of Wales Act 2006 will prevent an Assembly Act from modifying the law on reserved matters. Paragraph 2 will provide flexibility for an Assembly Act provision to be able to modify the law on reserved matters, where doing so is ancillary to a provision that does not relate to a reserved matter and there is no greater effect on reserved matters than is necessary to give effect to the purpose of the provision. The restriction relating to the private law in paragraph 3 and the restriction concerning the criminal law in paragraph 4 are intended to provide a general level of protection for the unified legal system of England and Wales while enabling the Assembly to enforce its legislation.

The protected areas of private law include core subjects such as the law of contract and property. However, the Assembly is given the power to modify the private law where the purpose of doing so does not relate to a reserved matter. Importantly, the Assembly is not permitted to modify the private law for its own sake and cannot make wholesale changes to the private law, such as the wholesale rewriting of contract law. Any modification of the private law must be for a range of devolved purposes.

On the criminal law side, in paragraph 4 the serious offences protected from modification include treason, homicide offences, sexual offences and serious offences against the person. It is right that these serious offences remain consistent across the UK. In addition, the Assembly will not be able to alter the law that governs the existing framework of criminal law, such as sentencing and capacity to commit crimes.

I am conscious of the fact that a whole host of issues have been raised, so I will conclude. This has been a full and wide-ranging debate. I hope I have been able to assure the Committee that the reserved powers model will provide a clear, robust and lasting devolution settlement for Wales. I urge Opposition Members to withdraw amendment 118.

**Paul Flynn:** We will press amendment 123 to a Division, but I beg to ask leave to withdraw amendment 118.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 3 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

**Schedule 1**

NEW SCHEDULE 7A TO THE GOVERNMENT OF WALES ACT 2006

Amendment proposed: 83, page 47, line 32, leave out Section B5. — (Liz Saville Roberts.)

This amendment removes the reservation of crime, public order and policing from the list of reserved powers.

**Question put,** That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 47, Noes 270.

**Division No. 37**

[7.8 pm]

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**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
Owen Thompson and Marion Fellows

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Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed: 123, page 49, leave out lines 24 to 29.—(Paul Flynn.)

Paragraph 55 of the new Schedule 7A to be inserted into the Government of Wales Act 2006 by Schedule 1 would reserve the licensing of the provision of entertainment and late night refreshment from the Assembly's legislative competence. Paragraph 56 would reserve the sale and supply of alcohol. This amendment removes both reservations.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 210, Noes 270.

Division No. 38] [7.21 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Rob
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Cheyld, rh Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim

Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Julian Smith and
George Hollingbery

Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lynch, Holly
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGarry, Natalie
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
Mearns, Ian
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
O'Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Starmer, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Thomberry, Emily
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeff Smith and
Vicky Foxcroft

NOES

Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Boles, Nick
Amendment 55, page 51, line 21, leave out “which
relates to” and insert “Imports, exports and movement of plants etc”
and insert “Import and export control”.

Amendment 54, page 51, line 17, leave out from
“exports” to end of line 19.

This amendment removes the reservation of prohibition and
regulation of the movement of food, plants, animals and other
things within the United Kingdom.

Amendment 55, page 51, line 1, leave out “which
relates to” and insert
“of movement into and out of Wales of”. "Imports, exports and movement of plants etc” and insert “Import and export control".

This is a drafting change consequential on amendment 54.

Amendment 54, page 51, line 17, leave out from “exports” to end of line 19.
The effect of this amendment and amendments 56, 57 and 58 is to make the exceptions in Section C5 similar to those in the corresponding Section of Schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998.

Amendment 56, page 51, line 22, leave out “, and which is”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 55.

Amendment 57, page 51, line 27, leave out “which relates to” and insert “of movement into and out of Wales of”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 55.

Amendment 58, page 51, line 29, leave out “, and which is”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 55.

Schedule 1, as amended, agreed to.

Schedule 2 agreed to.

Clause 22

ONSHORE PETROLEUM LICENSING

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): I beg to move, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Temporary Chair (Sir Alan Meale): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Clauses 23 to 27 stand part.

Amendment 74, in clause 36, page 29, line 17, leave out from “wind” to end of line 18.

This amendment removes the 350 megawatts limit on the Welsh Government’s legislative competence in the field of energy.

Amendment 75, page 29, line 21, leave out from “zone” to end of line 22.

See amendment 74.

Amendment 76, page 30, line 2, leave out paragraph (c).

This amendment is consequential on amendments 74 and 75.

Amendment 77, page 30, line 16, leave out from “waters” to end of line 21.

This amendment is consequential on amendments 74 and 75.

Amendment 78, page 30, line 37, leave out from “waters” to end of line 39.

This amendment is consequential on amendments 74 and 75.

Amendment 79, page 30, line 40, leave out sub-paragraph (a)(ii).

This amendment is consequential on amendments 74 and 75.

Amendment 80, page 30, line 47, leave out from “waters” to end of line 48.

This amendment is consequential on amendments 74 and 75.

Clause stand part.

Clause 37 stand part.

Government amendments 47 to 49.

Clause 38 stand part.

Amendment 158, in clause 39, page 32, line 23, leave out “or (4A)” and insert “to (4D)”.

See amendment 160.

Amendment 159, page 32, line 27, at beginning insert “subject to subsections (4B) to (4D),”.

See amendment 160.

Amendment 160, page 32, line 31, at end insert—

“(4B) Where Welsh Ministers are minded to grant planning consent for the construction or extension of a station generating electricity from wind which would have a capacity greater than 50 megawatts, they must not determine the application unless—

(a) they have sent to the Secretary of State—

(i) a copy of any representations made to them in respect of the application;

(ii) a copy of any report on the application prepared by an officer of the Welsh Government;

(iii) a statement of the decision they propose to make; and

(iv) where they propose to grant consent, a statement of any conditions they propose to impose and a draft of any planning obligation they propose to enter into and details of any proposed planning contribution; and

(b) either—

(i) a period of 14 days has elapsed beginning with the date notified in writing by the Secretary of State to Welsh Ministers as the date on which he received the documents referred to in paragraph (a); or

(ii) the Secretary of State has notified Welsh Ministers in writing that he is content for them to determine the application in accordance with the statement referred to in sub-paragraph (a)(iii) and, if applicable, the matters referred to in sub-paragraph (a)(iv).

(4C) Within the period of 14 days set out in paragraph (4B)(b)(i) the Secretary of State may direct Welsh Ministers to determine the application for the construction or extension of a station generating electricity from wind which would have a capacity greater than 50 megawatts—

(a) to withhold consent for a further period up to six months;

(b) to provide further information about the application; and

(c) where he makes a direction under paragraph (4C)(a) within the period specified in the direction to direct them to—

(i) grant consent subject, if necessary, to the conditions set out at paragraph (4B)(a)(iv); or

(ii) refuse consent.

(4D) The Secretary of State may give a direction to Welsh Ministers that applications for consent for the construction or extension of stations generating electricity from wind which would have a capacity less than 51 megawatts must be determined by local planning authorities and must not be called in or determined by Welsh Ministers.”

Clause 39 would devolve powers for onshore wind development approval to the Welsh Assembly. This amendment empowers the Secretary of State to be notified and veto projects considered a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP). The Secretary of State would be given two weeks to inform Welsh Ministers of projects proposed and determine whether they should be considered NSIP. The amendment empowers the Secretary of State to require Welsh Ministers to devolve approval for projects not considered an NSIP to local council level.

Clause stand part.

Clauses 40 to 43 stand part.

Amendment 81, in clause 44, page 34, leave out line 37 to line 5 on page 35 and insert—


This amendment removes the power of the Secretary of State to veto any Welsh legislation or measures that might have a serious adverse impact on water supply or quality in England.
Amendment 125, in clause 44, page 34, line 38, leave out from “(1),” to end of line 40 and insert “omit paragraph (b).”

This amendment removes both the extension of the power in section 114 of the Government of Wales Act 2006 that would be introduced by clause 44(1) and the power in section 114 to block Assembly Bills in respect of water matters.

Amendment 126, page 34, line 41, leave out subsection (2) and insert—

'( ) Omit section 152 of the Government of Wales Act 2006 (intervention in case of functions relating to water etc.)'.

This amendment removes both the extension of the power in section 152 of the Government of Wales Act 2006 that would be introduced by clause 44(2) and the power in section 152 of the Government of Wales Act 2006 to intervene in the exercise of devolved functions in respect of water matters.

Clause stand part.

Clause 45 stand part.

Amendment 130, in clause 46, page 35, line 33, leave out “consult” and insert “obtain the consent of”.

Clause 46 would require the Secretary of State to consult the Welsh Ministers before establishing or amending a renewable energy scheme as it relates to Wales. This amendment would require the Secretary of State to obtain the consent of the Welsh Ministers instead.

Amendment 132, leave out lines 1 to 3.

New section 148A(3) of the Government of Wales Act 2006 (as inserted by Clause 46) provides an exception to the consultation requirement for renewable energy schemes in respect of any levy in connection with such a scheme. This amendment is partly consequential upon amendment 130, but it would also mean that there would be a requirement for the Secretary of State to obtain the consent of the Welsh Ministers for any levy in connection with a renewable energy scheme as it relates to Wales.

Amendment 131, page 36, line 17, leave out subsection (2).

This amendment is consequential upon amendment 130.

Clause stand part.

Clauses 46 to 50 stand part.

Amendment 144, in clause 51, page 39, line 2, at end insert—

‘( ) If a statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (2) includes provision within devolved competence or provision modifying a devolution enactment, the Secretary of State must send a copy of the instrument or, if subsection (8A) applies, a draft of the instrument to the First Minister for Wales and the First Minister must lay it before the Assembly.”

This amendment and amendments 145, 146 and 147 are intended to apply appropriate Assembly procedures to regulations which make provision within the Assembly’s competence or which adjust the Welsh devolution settlement by modifying the Government of Wales Act 2006 or the Wales Act 2014 and provide for regulations containing provisions of this kind that amend primary legislation to be subject to an affirmative Assembly procedure, and for regulations containing provisions of the same kind which modify subordinate legislation to be subject to a negative Assembly procedure.

Amendment 147, page 39, line 2, at end insert—

‘( ) In this section ‘devolution enactment’ means a provision contained in—

(a) the Government of Wales Act 2006 or an instrument made under or having effect by virtue of that Act;

(b) the Wales Act 2014 or an instrument made under or having effect by virtue of that Act.

( ) For the purposes of this section—

(a) ‘modifying’ includes amending, repealing and revoking;

(b) ‘within devolved competence’ is to be read in accordance with subsections (7) and (8) of section 17, but no account is to be taken of the requirement to consult the appropriate Minister in paragraph 11(2) of Schedule 7B.”

See the statement for amendment 144.

Amendment 150, page 39, line 4, leave out “primary legislation” and insert “an Act of Parliament”.

The amendment introduces separate provisions for the use of the power in clause 51 in relation to an Act of Parliament.

Amendment 82, page 39, line 6, after “Parliament” insert

“and the National Assembly for Wales.”

This amendment ensures that when exercising the power to amend, repeal, revoke or modify any Acts or Measures of the National Assembly for Wales, the Secretary must seek the permission of the National Assembly, as well as both Houses of Parliament.

Amendment 145, page 39, line 6, at end insert—

“(6A) A statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (2) that includes—

(a) provision within devolved competence modifying any provision of primary legislation, or

(b) provision modifying any devolution enactment in primary legislation,

may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by a resolution of the Assembly.”

See the statement for amendment 144.

Amendment 151, page 39, line 6, at end insert—

“(6A) A statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (2) that includes provision amending or repealing any provision of a Measure or Act of the National Assembly for Wales may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament and the Assembly.”

The amendment provides that where the Secretary of State uses the power in clause 51 to make regulations that amend or repeal an Assembly Act or Assembly Measure, then the regulations must be approved by the Assembly and each House of Parliament.

Amendment 152, page 39, line 7, at beginning insert

“Subject to subsection (7A),”.

The amendment is linked to the provision that where the Secretary of State uses the power in clause 51 to make regulations that amend or revoke subordinate legislation made by the Welsh Ministers or the Assembly, the regulations would be subject to annulment by the Assembly and each House of Parliament.

Amendment 146, page 39, line 9, leave out

“...is subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament”

and insert

“...is subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of—

(a) either House of Parliament, and

(b) if it includes provision that would be within devolved competence or provision modifying a devolution enactment, the Assembly.”

See the statement for amendment 144.

Amendment 153, page 39, line 10, at end insert—

“(7A) A statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (2) that includes provision amending or revoking subordinate legislation made by—

(a) the Welsh Ministers, or

(b) the National Assembly for Wales as constituted by the Government of Wales Act 1998,
The amendment removes the definition of "primary legislation".

Amendment 154, page 39, line 11, leave out subsection (8).

The amendment provides that where the Secretary of State uses the power in clause 51 to make regulations that amend or revoke subordinate legislation made by the Welsh Ministers or the Assembly, the regulations would be subject to annulment by the Assembly and each House of Parliament.

Clause stand part.

That schedule 5 be the Fifth schedule to the Bill.

Clause 52 stand part.

Government amendments 59 and 60.

That schedule 6 be the Sixth schedule to the Bill.

Government amendments 50 to 52.

Amendment 12, in clause 53, page 40, line 8, at end insert—

'(4) Section 16(6) comes into force on the day appointed by the Treasury by order under section 14(2) of the Wales Act 2014 for the coming into force of sections 8 and 9 of that Act.'

The new limits proposed by New Clause 6 on borrowing by the Welsh Ministers are calculated by reference to the financial consequences of commencing the income tax provisions of the Wales Act 2014. This provision ensures that the new borrowing limits come into effect at the same time as commencement of the income tax provisions.

Clause stand part.

Clause 54 stand part.

New clause 4—Assignment of VAT—

'(1) The Government of Wales Act 2006 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 117(Welsh Consolidated Fund), after subsection (2) insert—

'(2A) The Secretary of State shall in accordance with section 64A pay into the Fund out of money provided by Parliament any amounts payable under that section.'

(3) After that section insert—

'117A Assignment of VAT

(1) Where there is an agreement between the Treasury and the Welsh Ministers for identifying an amount agreed to represent the standard rate VAT attributable to Wales for any period ("the agreed standard rate amount"), the amount described in subsection (3) is payable under this section in respect of that period.

(2) Where there is an agreement between the Treasury and the Welsh Ministers for identifying an amount agreed to represent the reduced rate VAT attributable to Wales for that period ("the agreed reduced rate amount"), the amount described in subsection (4) is payable under this section in respect of that period.

(3) The amount payable in accordance with subsection (1) is the amount obtained by multiplying the agreed standard rate amount by—

\[
\frac{10}{SR}
\]

where SR is the number of percentage points in the rate at which value added tax is charged under section 29A of the Value Added Tax Act 1994 for the period.

(4) The amount payable in accordance with subsection (2) is the amount obtained by multiplying the agreed reduced rate amount by—

\[
\frac{2.5}{RR}
\]

where RR is the number of percentage points in the rate at which value added tax is charged under section 29A(1) of the Value Added Tax Act 1994 for the period.

(5) The payment of those amounts under section 64(2A) is to be made in accordance with any agreement between the Treasury and the Welsh Ministers as to the time of the payment or otherwise.'

(4) The Commissioners for Revenue and Customs Act 2005 is amended as follows.

(5) In subsection (2) (confidentiality: exceptions) omit 'or' after paragraph (j), and after paragraph (k) insert 'or (l),'

(l) which is made in connection with (or with anything done with a view to) the making or implementation of an agreement referred to in section 117A(1) or (2) of the Government of Wales Act 2006 (assignment of VAT).'

(6) After that subsection insert—

'(2B) Information disclosed in reliance on subsection (2)(l) may not be further disclosed without the consent of the Commissioners (which may be general or specific).'

(7) In section 19 (wrongful disclosure) in subsections (1) and (8) after '18(1) or (2A)' insert 'or (2B).'

This new clause would allow the payment into the Welsh Consolidated Fund of half the receipts of Value Added Tax raised in Wales, on the lines of section 16 of the Scotland Act 2016.

New clause 5—Tax on carriage of passengers by air—

‘(1) In Part 4A of the Government of Wales Act 2006, after Chapter 4 insert—

CHAPTER 5

TAX ON CARRIAGE OF PASSENGERS BY AIR

116O Tax on carriage of passengers by air

'(1) A tax charged on the carriage of passengers by air from airports in Wales is a devolved tax.

(2) Tax may not be charged in accordance with that provision on the carriage of passengers boarding aircraft before the date appointed under subsection (6).

(3) Chapter 4 of Part 1 of The Finance Act 1994 (air passenger duty) is amended as follows.

(4) In section 28(4) (a chargeable passenger is a passenger whose journey begins at an airport in the United Kingdom), for “England, Wales or Northern Ireland” substitute “England or Northern Ireland”.

(5) In section 31(4B) (exception for passengers departing from airports in designated region of the United Kingdom) for “England, Wales or Northern Ireland” substitute “England or Northern Ireland”.

(6) Subsections (3) to (5) have effect in relation to flights beginning on or after such date as the Treasury appoint by regulations made by statutory instrument.’

This new clause would make air passenger duty a devolved tax in Wales, on the lines of section 16 of the Scotland Act 2016.

New clause 6—Lending for capital expenditure—

‘In section 122A(1) and (3) of the Government of Wales Act 2006 (lending for capital expenditure), for ‘£500 million’ substitute ‘£2 billion’.”

Section 122A of the Government of Wales Act 2006 (inserted by section 20(10) of the Wales Act 2014) makes provision for limits on borrowing by the Welsh Ministers for capital expenditure. This new clause changes the limit on the aggregate at any time outstanding from £500 million to £2 billion.

New clause 8—Corporation tax—

‘(1) In Part 4A of the Government of Wales Act 2006, after Chapter 4 insert—

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CHAPTER 4A
CORPORATION TAX

116P Corporation tax
A tax charged on trading profits in Wales is a devolved tax.”

This new clause would make corporation tax a devolved tax.

New clause 9—Trading profits taxable at the Welsh rate—

“After part 8B of the Corporation Tax Act 2010 insert—

“PART 8C

357Y The Welsh rate

(1) The Welsh rate of corporation tax for a financial year is—

(a) if a resolution of the National Assembly for Wales—

(i) sets a rate under section 357YA for the year, and

(ii) is passed before the beginning of the year,

the rate set by the resolution;

(b) if the Welsh rate for the year is not determined under paragraph (a), but the Welsh rate for one or more earlier financial years was determined under that paragraph, the rate for the most recent of those earlier years;

(c) otherwise, the main rate.

(2) For the purposes of subsection (1)(a)(ii), a resolution passed before the beginning of a financial year is treated as not having been so passed if it is cancelled by a resolution under section 357YA that is itself passed before the beginning of the year.

357YA Power of National Assembly for Wales to set Welsh rate

(1) The National Assembly for Wales may by resolution set the Welsh rate for one or more financial years specified in the resolution.

(2) The Assembly may by resolution cancel a resolution under subsection (1).

(3) A resolution under this section may not be passed by the National Assembly for Wales except in pursuance of a recommendation which is made by Welsh Ministers and which is signified to the National Assembly for Wales.

(4) This section authorises the setting of a nil rate.

357YB Welsh rate supplementary provision

(1) The Secretary of State must lay draft regulations before the House of Commons and the National Assembly for Wales within twelve months of this Act coming into force.

(2) The Secretary of State must seek the consent of the Treasury before laying draft regulations under this section.

(3) The Secretary of State may make regulations under his section only if both the House of Commons and the National Assembly for Wales have approved those regulations in draft.

(4) Regulations under this section may make any necessary provision, including modifying or amending any enactment, that the Secretary of State or the Treasury considers necessary for the introduction of a Welsh rate of corporation tax.

(5) Regulations under this section may, for example, include—

(a) provision for the application of the Welsh rate of corporation tax to Welsh profits;

(b) provision about the operation of certain reliefs for trading losses that are given against profits;

(c) definitions of “Welsh company”, “qualifying trade”, “small or medium-sized enterprise” and “Welsh employer”;

(d) provision about whether a company has a Welsh regional establishment;

(e) rules for determining whether profits or losses of a trade are “Welsh profits” or “Welsh losses”;

(f) rules applying in the case of a Welsh company that is not a small or medium-sized enterprise;

(g) rules applying in the case of a Welsh company that is not a small or medium-sized enterprise;

(h) the treatment of intangible fixed assets in relation to Welsh companies;

(i) provision about R&D expenditure credits and relief for expenditure relating to research and development;

(j) provision about relief for expenditure relating to the remediation of contaminated or derelict land;

(k) provision about film tax relief, television production, video games development and theatrical productions;

(l) provision about profits arising from exploitation of patents etc.;

(m) rules for determining whether profits or losses of a trade are “Welsh profits” or “Welsh losses” in the case of a company that is a partner in a Welsh firm;

(n) definitions of “excluded trade” and “excluded activity” (profits of which are not Welsh profits); and

(o) provision about the meaning of “back-office activities” (profits imputed to which may be Welsh profits).”

This new clause mirrors the approach of the Corporation Tax (Northern Ireland) Act 2015 in defining a Welsh rate of corporation tax, but leaves the details to be set out in secondary legislation.

Guto Bebb: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this evening, Sir Alan.

Clause 22, alongside detailed technical provisions in part 2 of schedule 5, devolves onshore petroleum licensing in Wales to Welsh Ministers, fulfilling the St David’s Day commitment. Clause 23 is necessary to facilitate a smooth transfer of existing onshore licences. Clause 24 transfers to Welsh Ministers the regulation-making powers in the Infrastructure Act 2015 with respect to the right to use deep-level land below 300 metres for the purpose of exploiting onshore petroleum.

The St David’s day agreement stated that responsibility for speed limits in Wales should be devolved. It also committed the Government to consider the Smith agreement, to determine which recommendations for Scotland should also apply to Wales. As a result of this work, powers over traffic signs, including pedestrian crossings, will also be devolved. Clause 25 and section E1 of schedule 1 devolve these powers by reserving only powers relating to the exemption of vehicles from speed limits and certain traffic signs—for example, emergency vehicles attending incidents.

Together, the clause and the schedule have the effect of devolving to the Assembly and Welsh Ministers legislative and executive competence in respect of substantially all the provisions of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 that concern speed limits and traffic signs. This means the Assembly will be able to legislate in respect of substantially all aspects of speed limits and traffic signs on all roads in Wales.

Clause 26 fulfils a St David’s day commitment and implements a Silk commission recommendation to devolve the registration of local bus services, including the relevant functions of the traffic commissioner. Devolution of bus registration is achieved by the matter not being listed as a reserved matter in schedule 7A. Clause 26 gives effect to the devolution of the relevant traffic commissioner functions to Welsh Ministers. Clause 27 also fulfils a St David’s day commitment and a Silk commission recommendation by devolving the regulation of taxi and private hire vehicle services in Wales to Welsh Ministers.
This complements the devolution of legislative competence to the Assembly for taxi and private hire vehicle licensing in new schedule 7A. Taxi and PHV services are currently licensed by local authorities under legislation that covers England and Wales outside London. Local licensing authorities set their own policies and standards. I therefore support these clauses standing part of the Bill.

Paul Flynn: These considerable and weighty clauses will bring significant benefits to the people of Wales. We are grateful for the improvements that have taken place as a result of the Government accepting the criticisms made of the draft Bill. Real progress is being made.

The main issues I wish to raise with this group of amendments involve energy, because there is a great opportunity for Wales to become a powerhouse for energy for the whole United Kingdom. For too long, we have neglected the vast energy of the tide that sweeps around the Welsh coast at different times of the day, providing pulses of energy that could be coupled with demand-responsive schemes such as pumped storage schemes in order to give completely demand-responsive electricity not only cleanly, but by providing renewable power in an entirely predictable way—the tide will always come in.

We have made huge strides in Wales on hydro schemes in Rheidol, Ffrestiniog and Dinorwic. The possibility of using the topography of Wales to produce energy has been long neglected. When we look at the problems of the Port Talbot steelworks, we need to realise that washing along the shore of those steelworks is the highest rise and fall of tide in the world. They are in trouble because their energy is so expensive, yet a source of energy is available on their doorstep—free, British, eternal and absolutely predictable.

Amendments 130 to 132 deal with renewable energy schemes. These Welsh Government amendments would create a duty on the Secretary of State to consult Welsh Ministers before establishing or amending a renewable energy incentive scheme in Wales. As drafted, the clause excludes the requirement for the Secretary of State to consult in relation to the creation of a levy to fund an incentive scheme.

The obligation merely to consult is insufficient in respect of this important matter. The Energy Act 2013 provides that the Secretary of State must consult Welsh Ministers before making regulations in relation to contracts for difference. This is a fairly fresh concept, but it has been used widely by this Government and the previous one. Interested parties should also be consulted before a renewables obligation closure order is issued. When the UK Government announced the early closure of the renewables obligation scheme for onshore wind in 2015, there was no prior consultation with Welsh Ministers. We therefore think it essential that, as part of establishing an appropriate devolution settlement for energy, the requirement is put on a firmer and clearer footing. The amendment therefore provides that the Welsh Ministers’ agreement must be sought in relation to renewable energy incentive schemes in Wales either proposed or, in the case of existing schemes, proposed for amendment.

We further propose the omission of clause 46(3), which inappropriately limits the scope of the responsibility of the Secretary of State to engage constructively with Welsh Ministers. We see no reason, and none is offered in the explanatory notes accompanying the Bill, why that engagement should not extend to the consideration of matters relating to levies to fund renewable energy incentive schemes.

Amendments 144 and 147 relate to clause 51. Clause 51 provides the Secretary of State with order-making powers to make consequential provision following the enactment of the Wales Bill. This includes powers to amend, repeal, revoke or otherwise modify primary or secondary legislation as he considers appropriate. Affirmative procedure in both Houses is provided for where the amendment or repeal of primary legislation is envisaged in any such order. There is, however, no provision for Assembly approval of a draft order that would repeal or modify Assembly legislation. Furthermore, as the Bill is drafted, the Secretary of State could propose orders making modifications to the Acts of Parliament underpinning the Welsh devolution settlement without requiring the Assembly’s consent, although parliamentary consent would be needed. Even if such modifications were contained in a parliamentary Bill, the Assembly’s consent would be required. This is wrong in principle. If the Secretary of State wishes to take powers by order to make amendments, up to and including repeal, to Assembly legislation, that should be possible only with the consent of the Assembly itself.

If orders are proposed that would make changes to the parliamentary legislation establishing the Welsh devolution settlement, they, too, should require Assembly consent before they can be made. The Welsh Government amendments would give effect to those important principles.

I welcome the agreement in this House across all parties. Plaid Cymru introduced a slightly tribal note by attacking Labour for not going to the same lengths that it has gone to in some of its amendments, but I think Labour has taken a pragmatic view. Where the Government made it clear they are not going to change their minds, we have tried to introduce amendments that are halfway between the Opposition and Government positions, and which might be acceptable to the Government. It should not be concluded from that that we have shown any lack of enthusiasm for the process of devolution.

Plaid Cymru’s amendment 74 relates to energy limits. The Welsh Government would have no powers over schemes above 350 MW. That is a very low level. It would include the tidal lagoon in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), but it would not include the two tidal lagoons planned for either side—the Cardiff side and the Newport side—of the River Usk. The two schemes have enormous possibilities to produce huge amounts of electricity, particularly if they are linked with pumped storage schemes in the valleys. If the pulse of electricity comes in the early hours of the morning when it is not required, the energy can be used to pump the water up to the adjacent hills very close to the shore in Newport, and then drawn down to produce electricity throughout the day. This is a form of energy production that we have long, long neglected. We have ignored the power of the tide and we have used other, polluting forms of energy.
7.45 pm

We are admirably suited in Wales, because of our geography, to hydroelectric schemes. Three splendid schemes already function quietly: Ffestiniog, Rheidol, which is quite small, and Dinorwig. Dinorwig is the great battery of the nation, which is hugely valued by the National Grid. It knows that in times of peak demand, in breaks between television programmes and so on, it can press a button here in London and send the water cascading down the mountain in Dinorwig. These are functions that should be under the control of the Welsh Assembly, where there is the enthusiasm to make Wales the great powerhouse of the United Kingdom with energy that is green, clean, eternal and British.

**Chris Davies:** I rise to speak to my amendments 158, 159 and 160. The Committee knows I have many concerns about the Bill and I have stated them very clearly over the past few weeks and months.

Today, I turn to the devolving of wind energy to the Welsh Assembly, which is of great concern to the people of Brecon and Radnorshire in mid-Wales, whom I represent. This is not a common-sense approach to energy. I was very concerned to hear the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) state that Wales could be the energy centre of Great Britain. That makes the people I represent fear that the whole of mid-Wales will be covered with wind turbines. I am sure he is referring to other matters—I hope he is—but we have to remember the way that Cardiff Bay has looked at mid-Wales over the years. We are fearful that we will be littered, covered and blanketed with wind turbines.

We all have a great confidence in the Secretary of State, so I would like to see him have a veto over a UK-wide energy plan that is in the national interest. To have powers particular to the Welsh Assembly does not fit in with the strategic plan for power in Great Britain as a whole—that is the underlying concern. Cardiff Bay should not just be able to make those points and make arrangements for Wales; it needs to be done by Britain as a whole. A veto would give local people an appeal over proposals that may not be in the UK-wide interest. It would also allow local people to have a say in local decisions.

Before coming into this place, I was a councillor on Powys County Council. There was a possibility—more than a possibility—that planning permission was going to be granted so that the whole of mid-Wales would be covered in turbines. The council had to contribute £4 million to fight a legal case against the Government of the day. That money would have been better spent—as we know, Powys is under-utilised as far as money from the Assembly is concerned—on providing local services to local people, instead of having to fight a legal case against wind turbines. For many reasons, I would therefore like the Secretary of State to hold a veto. I repeat the fact that we have confidence in him. We had confidence in his predecessors and I have no doubts that we will have confidence in future Secretaries of State, so let the power stay there.

**Paul Flynn:** Wales suffered for centuries the dirt, the pollution and the danger of extracting coal from the ground, while the comfort and the money made from it was enjoyed throughout the United Kingdom. Nobody wants to go back to that. The sources of power I specifically mentioned were hydro-power and tidal power. They are not only very good neighbours but they can enhance the landscape by providing lakes and other facilities.

The hon. Gentleman should concentrate on the wider picture and see the possibilities, through the amendment, that the Welsh Government could develop.

**Chris Davies:** I agreed with most of what the hon. Gentleman said, but I do not think he listened to what I said. I am talking specifically about wind energy, to which my amendment relates, not about hydro-energy, off-coast energy or land energy.

I ask the Secretary of State to retain the possibility of a veto. I will not press the amendment to a vote—I am sure that you and many others will be delighted to hear that, Sir Alan—but I hope that the Secretary of State will look at the clause again.

**Hywel Williams:** I want to speak to amendments 74 to 80, 81 and 82, 151 and 154, which I tabled along with my hon. Friends.

I welcome clauses 22, 23 and 24, which confer competence on Welsh Ministers in relation to onshore petroleum licensing, including hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, about which the Welsh people care a great deal. If the people of Wales do not want fracking, our Government should be able to ensure that it does not happen. Given that the Welsh Government and the National Assembly as a whole voted unanimously against fracking in Wales, I hope that the Secretary of State will work with his Cabinet colleagues to ensure that until the Bill is passed, the United Kingdom Government honour that unanimous opposition in Wales and no new licences are issued there. I hope that, at the end of the debate, either the Secretary of State or the Under-Secretary will give some indication that that will be the case.

I also welcome clause 26. Some time ago, I had a meeting with the traffic commissioner for Wales, who was based in Birmingham at the time. He was very unhappy about being traffic commissioner for Wales, and pointed out that not only did he work from Birmingham, but he lived in Derby, which is a considerable distance from Wales. Many years ago, the Welsh Affairs Committee called for the commissioner to be moved to Cardiff, and I am glad that the clause achieves a great deal more than that.

Amendments 74 and 75, and consequential amendments 76 to 80, would remove the 350 MW limit on the Welsh Government’s legislative competence in the field of energy. I would happily put a fiver on what is on the Under-Secretary of State’s notepad: my guess is that he intends to say that the limit was recommended by the Silk commission. I wish I had put that fiver down, because I see that the Under-Secretary is smiling.

Of course I accept that the Silk commission recommended the limit, but let us return for a moment to the purpose and the terms of the commission. It was set up by the coalition Government, with a Conservative Secretary of State for Wales. It consisted of one nominee from each of the four main parties at the time, including the Secretary of State’s and mine, along with various academic and other experts. It consulted widely and extensively with the political parties, civic society, academia and industry experts, as well as the public. Its two
reports represented a consensus, reflecting not only the views of the political parties but, crucially, those of the public and of experts—that is, the views of civic society in general.

With that purpose in mind, the players in all four political parties had to compromise, and all four—including the Secretary of State’s party and mine—did so, in order to achieve a national consensus. That was a contrast with the St David’s day process, in which I played a minor part. At the time, the Secretary of State appeared to hand a veto to each party in respect of what it wished to reject. Labour used its veto to the full, which reflected the stance of the then shadow Secretary of State, as a self-confessed “proud Unionist”. It seemed to me that the veto extended to Whitehall Departments, in terms of which matters they wanted to reserve.

As was clear from my earlier intervention on the Secretary of State, I am still slightly unconvinced about this process—

Alun Cairns rose—

Hywel Williams: I will gladly give way to him.

Alun Cairns: What example has there been of devolution to Wales in the past where the Secretary of State has really sought to bring about agreement throughout the House on a pragmatic, practical way forward, rather than bulldozing one particular model over another?

Hywel Williams: I was very glad to play a minor part in the St David’s day process, as was my colleague at the time, Elfyn Llwyd. I think there was a structural deficiency in that process, in that if individual parties wanted to veto a particular matter, they could do so—fine: that was what the process was about—but, to my mind at least, one party made rather a meal of that dispensation, and vetoed a great deal that quite reasonably have been included. The criticism of the first draft of the Bill reflects that, but the current version is a great improvement, and I am happy to pay tribute to the Secretary of State and his predecessor for their achievement.

Some parties compromised on policing, and some on broadcasting. My party compromised on energy. We have always believed that Wales’s natural resources should be in the hands of the people of Wales, and that the people of Wales are best placed to make decisions about how best to put those resources to use. That is our historic stance. We have never believed in placing a limit on that principle, above which the people of Wales should no longer have a say. We never thought that that was a good idea, and never thought that it was necessary. However, we compromised, for the good of the Silk process and to ensure good order and progress. We agreed to the arbitrary limit of 350 MW in return for the support of others on policing and broadcasting.

The Secretary of State has chosen not to follow that consensual path, and to pick and choose from the Silk Commission’s recommendations which matters to accept and which to forgo. Indeed, he has chosen to ignore the majority of what Silk had to say. He cannot now reasonably defend that Westminster power grab and attack Plaid Cymru by claiming that he is only following the commission’s recommendations. We shall see what the Under-Secretary of State has to say about that one.

Clause 36 must be understood as it stands. Having voted to give Scotland complete control over its natural resources, with no limits, the Secretary of State is proposing to devolve energy in Wales only up to a limit of 350 MW, with anything above that threshold being reserved to Westminster. Why does he believe that Scottish natural resources should be in the hands of the people of Scotland, but Wales’s natural resources, above the limit, should be deemed to be the preserve of Westminster? Does he think that the people of Wales cannot be trusted with any energy projects above 350 MW? Do we suffer from some congenital infirmity in that respect? For that matter, why should it be 350 MW rather than 351, or 349? Perhaps the Under-Secretary of State will enlighten us. What factual evidence has he to justify that figure?

The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) referred to the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon. It is proposed that the lagoon should be devolved to Wales, but that the proposed Cardiff and Colwyn Bay tidal lagoons, which are identical apart from scale, should be reserved to Westminster. What is the rhyme or reason for that? What practical reasons are there for such a distinction?

Let me give another practical example. In my constituency, there is a great capacity for hydro-electric power. The Dinorwig scheme, which has been mentioned, is a massive scheme that can power Manchester for five hours at the throw of a switch. It takes eight seconds for the turbines to start turning. It is an astonishing scheme, which I think is one of the great energy production secrets of Wales. I understand that the switch is thrown in Connah’s Quay and not in London, and that it controls not only Dinorwig but the Stwlan facility in Blaenau Ffestiniog, as well as Maentwrog. So here we have an astonishingly good scheme and the potential for several more, some of the same scale but also some smaller ones.

8 pm

A smaller scheme was proposed just outside Llanberis. The proposers came to see me and said that they were going to restrict it to 49 MW. When I asked them why they said that if it was 51 MW, it would get entangled in the processes down in Whitehall. When I met them recently they said that they are now proposing 350 MW. I asked why not 351 MW, and they said, “Because it would get entangled in the processes down in Whitehall.” That is a clear example.

I will give one further example that illustrates this point. When foot and mouth disease was active in Wales, I wrote to the Welsh Minister and the Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about the autumn movement of livestock scheme. I got a reply from Cardiff within two weeks, and one in May—it was about the autumn movement of livestock scheme—from London. That is the sort of problem these people thought they might be struggling with. I urge the Secretary of State to reconsider his position on this limit, and unless he comes up with a plausible answer, we will seek leave to divide the House on amendment 74.

Clause 38 is of course linked to clause 36, which we are seeking to amend, and we disagree with Government amendments 47 to 49 because they seek to add the 350 MW limit to clause 38. I welcome clause 39 which devolves power over onshore wind to Wales, but we are
not supportive of amendments 158 to 160, which seek to give the UK Government a veto. I do not think we need to spend too much time explaining why that is an unacceptable proposal. Members who have put their names to those amendments are well known for their opposition, which I respect and understand, but I disagree fundamentally with them.

While we welcome clause 46 which requires the Secretary of State to consult Welsh Ministers before establishing or amending a renewable energy scheme as it relates to Wales, we fully support the amendment from the official Opposition which proposes that the Secretary of State should obtain the consent of Welsh Ministers rather than simply consult them. So we would support amendments 130 and 131 and 132. I do not know if it is the intention of the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) to press those amendments, but our support would be there.

Clauses 48 and 49 are welcome, but we are concerned about Government amendment 60, which again tries to impose this arbitrary limit of 350 MW on the Assembly’s competence. We welcome clause 22, which devolves some aspects of road transport, including speed limits, and likewise we welcome clauses 26 and 27 which devolve responsibility over bus services and taxi regulation respectively.

I shall now turn to clause 28 and amendment 81, which amends clause 44. Clause 44 refers to sections 114 and 152 of the Government of Wales Act 2006, which gives the Secretary of State for Wales a veto over any Acts or measures of the Assembly that might have a serious adverse impact on water quality or supply in England. This has been referred to in earlier debates. While the expectation was that this Bill would remove these sections from the Government of Wales Act, in fact it seems to extend the power of veto to cover sewerage services in England.

These sections embody the peculiar notion that Wales is somehow incapable of managing its own resources. Once again, it is exclusive to the Welsh settlement. Neither the Secretary of State for Scotland nor the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland have such powers, so why must the Secretary of State for Wales have a veto over Welsh water? It makes Wales a special case—a lesser case. It continues and entrenches the status of Wales in Westminster. It protects the legality of English exploitation of Welsh resources, and avoids recognition of what was referred to earlier as a shameful past. I need not go into the history of the drowning of Capel Celyn in 1965, in which the entire community in that part of rural Wales was flooded, but such events remain perfectly legal. Removing sections 114 and 152 from the Government of Wales Act, as amendment 81 would do, would at long last ensure that the actions of this Parliament in 1965 could never be repeated. I will seek to divide the Committee on amendment 81, as I believe it is of particular importance to the people of Wales. For the same reasons, if called, we will be supporting amendments 125 and 126 tabled by the official Opposition, which seek to achieve the same aim.

 Needless to say, we will not be supporting clause 44 stand part. We welcome Clauses 45, 47 and 50. If called, we will support Opposition amendments 144 to 147.

Amendment 82 tabled by Plaid Cymru would ensure that when exercising the power to amend, repeal, revoke or modify any Acts or measures of the National Assembly for Wales, the Secretary of State must seek the permission of the National Assembly as well as both Houses of Parliament. Amendments 150 to 154, in the names of my hon. Friends and myself, are similar to amendment 82, but introduce separate provisions for the amendment, repeal or revocation of Acts of Parliament, Assembly primary legislation and Assembly subordinate legislation. They provide that where the Secretary of State uses the power in clause 51 to make regulations that amend or repeal an Assembly Act or Assembly measure, the regulations must be approved by the affirmative procedure in the Assembly as well as each House of Parliament. They make similar provision in respect of the Secretary of State using the power in clause 51 to make regulations that amend or revoke subordinate legislation made by Welsh Ministers or the Assembly. These regulations would be subject to the negative procedure, rather than the affirmative procedure. They also provide that the Assembly would have no role where the power in clause 51 was used to make regulations that amend or repeal an Act of Parliament or amend or revoke non-Assembly subordinate legislation.

We would be happy to support Government amendments 59, 50 and 51, but we do not see why the Secretary of State should make an exception in respect of when the clause 17 functions of Welsh Ministers should come into force. Why should everything else come into force two months after Royal Assent, but for clause 17 we will have to wait until the Secretary of State says so? Perhaps the Under-Secretary might explain.

We agree with Opposition amendment 12, which is linked with new clause 6, to extend the Welsh Government’s borrowing capacity. It is absolutely right that the Welsh Government should have fiscal levers at their disposal to facilitate economic growth in all corners of our country—and, I stress, all corners not just in the heartlands of south-east Wales.

Plaid Cymru has taken this Bill extremely seriously. We have tabled a great number of amendments. We shall press two amendments to a vote this evening and, with leave, new clause 2 if there is sufficient time. I look forward to hearing the Under-Secretary’s response.

Mr David Jones: I shall speak briefly in support of amendments 158 to 160 in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies). He has dealt very well with the thrust of the amendments and I do not wish to repeat what he has said. However, I would like to focus on proposed new subsection (4D) which provides:

“The Secretary of State may give a direction to Welsh Ministers that applications for consent for the construction or extension of stations generating electricity from wind which would have a capacity less than 51 megawatts must be determined by local planning authorities and must not be called in or determined by Welsh Ministers.”

As I mentioned on Second Reading, there have been unintended consequences of the Energy Act 2016, which is a development of UK Government policy that provides that all applications for onshore wind generating stations should no longer be governed by the Planning Act 2008, but should instead be determined by local planning authorities. This applies also in Wales, but as a consequence of Welsh legislation, the Welsh Government have designated all wind farm developments in Wales as so-called developments of national significance, which fall to be considered by the Welsh Government.
My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire is right to insert this provision. We both come from parts of Wales where the development of wind farms has caused huge problems. They have been disproportionately scattered across rural Wales and there are large areas that almost literally have a turbine on every hillside. Local communities certainly want these applications to be determined at local level, and it is entirely right that the Welsh Government, having taken it upon themselves to adopt this power, should now have it taken away from them. The power should be returned to local authorities.

As I have suggested, this has been an example of the law of unintended consequences. I am absolutely sure that the Government did not expect that, as a consequence of the Energy Act 2016, all such applications would fall to be determined by the Welsh Government. That is what has happened, however, and local communities have been disfranchised. This proposal is therefore a sensible one, and I ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to give consideration to it. If he cannot accept it this evening, will he take it away and come back with another proposal on Report to address the concerns that I have outlined?

Jonathan Edwards: I rise to speak to new clauses 4, 5, 8 and 9. I also refer Members to my speech on new clauses 2 and 3 and income tax during our first day in Committee last week.

New clause 5 would devolve air passenger duty to Wales. In 2012, the Silk commission recommended the devolution of a block of financial powers, including air passenger duty, to the National Assembly. That was a carefully crafted package of measures. Those minor taxes were clearly listed as pressing, and the commission recommended that they be devolved in the next possible legislative vehicle, which happened to be the 2013 Finance Bill. For whatever reason, however, APD was missing from that Bill and a Plaid Cymru amendment that would have included it was defeated.

On the publication of its recommendations, the commission had cross-party and governmental support. However, four years on, I am disappointed that the Government have turned their back on the commission and its recommendations. They are instead simply cherry-picking the amendments that will be the least disruptive to the current devolution arrangement for Wales. In that period, we have had a Northern Ireland Act and two Scotland Acts through which APD was devolved to those countries and, needless to say, Labour and Tory MPs based in Wales supported those Acts. Wales is, once again, getting the short end of the stick when it comes to devolved taxation.

I am disappointed that the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) is not in the Chamber. Although she is apparently oblivious to her party’s inability to support the devolution of APD twice in the previous Parliament, she has rightly stated:

“Air passenger duty has already been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and...to the Scottish Parliament, but despite this, the Budget did not propose that it be devolved to the Welsh Assembly.”—[Official Report, 25 May 2016; Vol. 611, c. 521.]

She asked for it to be devolved, and that is an unimpeachable argument—I agree with every word she said.

Mr David Jones: Has the hon. Gentleman given any consideration to the impact that his proposals might have on north Wales’s local airports in Liverpool and Manchester?

Jonathan Edwards: The whole point of devolving APD to Wales is to allow Welsh Ministers to set their own priorities for the aviation industry in Wales. At the end of the day, it will be up to Welsh Ministers to consider the most appropriate APD policy for Wales to maximise revenues from their own public asset. Let us remember that Cardiff airport is owned by the people of Wales. Clearly, increasing footfall at the airport could generate substantial revenues elsewhere, primarily by boosting economic performance across the whole of the economy, especially in the Secretary of State’s own Vale of Glamorgan constituency.

I am not privy to the Cardiff airport’s strategic planning, but my understanding is that the element of APD that the airport is most interested in is long-haul taxation. As I mentioned, the airport has a superb runway that can accommodate transatlantic flights, which Bristol airport cannot. If Cardiff were to develop that angle of its business, that could surely be of use to Bristol airport, if transport links between both airports could be improved. There lies a challenge for the Welsh Government, because our international airport urgently needs public transport upgrades to get people from...
Cardiff—and indeed Swansea—to and from the airport. The current infrastructure is awful, compared with that of Belfast, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Recent public opinion polls suggest that 78% of Welsh voters agree that APD should be devolved. That does not quite compare with the percentage who support the introduction of Welsh bank notes, but that incredibly high number is still a clear indication of public opinion. It takes a brave politician to ignore opinion poll figures of those proportions.

Furthermore, the National Assembly should have more responsibility for the money it spends. The Secretary of State for Wales himself has said that increasing its taxation responsibilities makes the Assembly “truly accountable” to the people of Wales, so why not include air passenger duty in the list of devolved taxes? Why continue to limit the financial responsibilities of the Welsh Government? Jane Hutt, the former Minister for Finance and Government Business in the Welsh Government, who I am not in the habit of quoting, has said:

“It is...disappointing that the UK Government has decided to continue its procrastination over the devolution of Air Passenger Duty. This discriminatory approach is unacceptable and unjustifiable”.

We have seen during the progress of the Bill that what the Labour Government say in Wales does not necessarily translate into voting behaviour where it counts down here in Westminster. Official Opposition Members might be relieved to hear that I do not intend to press the new clause to a Division, but I will return to the matter on Report. I hope that, in the meantime, the Secretary of State will listen to one of the most important strategic players in his constituency and his country, and I look forward to him bringing forward Government amendments to devolve APD before the Bill completes its progress through the House.

I now turn my attention to new clause 4, which would equalise the situation between Wales and Scotland when it comes to VAT revenues. The Scotland Act 2016 stated that revenues from the first 10 percentage points of the standard VAT rate would be devolved by the 2019-20 financial year. The current UK VAT rate is 20% and half of all the VAT raised in Scotland will be kept in Scotland. It is important to note that the Scottish Government will have no ability to change VAT rates.

Sales taxes in the United States are state taxes, not federal taxes, so different states have different levels of their version of VAT. We propose equalising the situation with Scotland because although EU rules prohibit different sales tax levels within the boundaries of a member state, adopting the Scottish model could pave the way, in a post-Brexit scenario, to devolving VAT in its entirety to Wales, to Scotland and to Northern Ireland. In a post-Brexit UK, it seems clear that significant political and fiscal powers will have to be conceded by Westminster unless the post-Brexit vision is an even more lopsided state in which power and wealth are even more concentrated in London and the south-east.

The Scottish model has some incentivising benefits as it would help to galvanise the Welsh Government to boost the spending power of our citizens by basing a job creation strategy around well-paid jobs and seriously getting to grips with our low-wage economy. As page 4 of Cardiff University’s excellent “Government Expenditure and Revenue Wales 2016” report states:

“VAT was the largest source of revenue in Wales (raising £5.2 billion), followed by Income Tax (£4.6 billion) and National Insurance Contributions (£4.0 billion). The composition of revenues in Wales is markedly different from the UK as a whole. Large direct taxes...make up less of a share of total Welsh revenue, while a greater share is raised through indirect taxes”.

The report’s point is that indirect taxes such as VAT generate more revenue in Wales than direct taxes such as income tax. The report also indicates that Welsh tax revenues have grown by 12.3% since 2011, the main component of which was VAT revenues.

As long as we have a Tory UK Government, economic growth will continue to be based around consumer spending. If that is the case, it is all the more important that the people of Wales directly benefit from that growth and from their own spending power. Denying Wales the same powers as Scotland on VAT seems to be a deliberate attempt to undermine revenues for the Welsh Government.

New clause 4 is probing, so I will not be pressing it to a vote at this stage, but I look forward to hearing the UK Government’s justification for why they have not given Wales the same status as Scotland, especially considering the good performance of Wales—for whatever reason—in generating VAT revenues. I may return to this matter during the Bill’s later stages.

Similarly probing are new clauses 8 and 9, which would devolve corporation tax to mirror the situation in Northern Ireland. As a proud Welshman, I want my country to succeed. I desperately want our GDP to increase and to close the gap between the GDPs of Wales and the UK. If that is to happen, we unquestionably have to make Wales a more attractive place to do business. I want to make Wales the most attractive place in the UK to do business, and I hope that the Secretary of State for Wales would want the same for his country.

Most other countries are able to set their own rates of corporation tax. It is a lever with which a national Government can influence their country’s desirability to potential investors, but Wales is restricted from doing so. We are forced to compete with the other UK nations with our hands tied behind our backs. Northern Ireland has a huge competitive advantage over Wales, and we know about the rate in the Republic of Ireland, with which we share a sea border. We cannot build a High Speed 2 for Wales. We cannot electrify our railways and we cannot offer tax incentives. We are constantly forced to come to Westminster with a begging bowl. We are still waiting for even an inch of electrified railway. We are still not getting full Barnett consequentials from HS2, let alone getting our own high-speed rail, and we are once again being told that we cannot use corporation tax as a way of attracting business.

Alun Cairns: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman’s proposal on devolving corporation tax. How would Wales cope with the significant volatility of corporation tax income?

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful for that intervention because it provides a great insight into the Secretary of State’s thinking. If that is his argument on fiscal powers, he should align himself with the Labour party, which opposes Wales having income tax powers for exactly the same reason. This is about whether one believes that the Welsh Government can use such levers effectively to create jobs in our country. That intervention is indicative of the Secretary of State’s mindset.
Given that corporation tax is devolved in Northern Ireland, I hope that the Secretary of State will do his job, stand up for Wales and make it a devolved tax in Wales, as was recommended by the Silk commission's report.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Thank you, Sir Alan, for calling me to speak in this hugely important debate. All Welsh Members recognise the Bill as an attempt to create a stable, long-lasting devolutionary settlement for Wales that provides financial accountability to the Welsh Government. I associate myself with many of the comments from both sides of the Committee, although I do not agree with everything that has been said.

I want to refer specifically to amendments 158 to 160, which have featured quite a lot in today's debate. I have been inspired to speak in part by the contribution of the shadow Secretary of State for Wales, in which he was positive about energy. There is real potential for Wales to become an energy giant. I have been to Dinorwig about three times and have been inspired by the history of what Wales has achieved in energy production. We have even had—the shadow Secretary of State will not agree with me on this subject—nuclear energy generation in Wales on a considerable scale. It has formed part of a real decarbonisation effort, which I have supported and which we may well carry on at Wylfa B. We have the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon project and other such projects, and there is wonderful potential for Wales if they go ahead. At this stage, the issue is clearly one of whether they will become financially viable. There is no doubt that the tidal range is amazing, and I certainly hope that those schemes can be approved and that Wales can carry on its history of making a contribution to energy generation.

I am also inspired by those who tabled the amendments, including my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones). The devolution of energy is a difficult issue for me, and I want to run through the reasons why. My concern is about onshore wind farms and the implications of onshore wind, particularly for my constituency. I am desperately keen to support the devolution process and keen that the Wales Bill be successful, particularly in relation to financial accountability. The Bill will enable the Assembly to become a Parliament and to grow up. However, the Welsh Government's history when it comes to onshore wind causes huge problems, certainly in my constituency. They are landscape vandals—landscape philistines. That has been the general approach of the Welsh Government when it comes to onshore wind as well. If that were part of this Bill, for me, representing my constituency and facing a Government in Cardiff who wanted to do it great damage, the Bill would be difficult to support.

Guto Bebb: We have had a decent debate about the issues relating to this group of amendments. Clause 36 is a carefully drafted clause, which, again, gives effect to the St David's day commitment on energy consenting. The combined effect of subsections (1) to (6) is to disapply the Secretary of State's power under the Planning Act 2008 to grant development consent for electricity generating stations in Wales and in the Welsh inshore and offshore zones, not exceeding a capacity of 350MW. This is a compromise, but one based on the views expressed by Silk and the St David's day agreement, which was attempting to reach a consensus. Development consenting for all onshore wind-powered generating stations in Wales has already been devolved through the Energy Act 2016, and I shall say more about that in a moment in relation to some of the amendments put forward by Conservative Members.

Amendments 74 to 80 were tabled by the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), and they again seek to reopen the issue of the political consensus we found under Silk and as part of the St David's day process. It is important that we recognise that the Bill is attempting to move forward on the basis of consensus, whereas the amendments are trying to open up the whole issue once more. Clearly, we have to accept that the electricity transmission system in England and Wales is thoroughly integrated, and we must keep that in mind when we legislate on this issue. It is also important to highlight that the consensus on the 350MW figure is appropriate, given that we are dealing with a system that is interrelated and interdependent. It is moving significant changes and decision-making powers to Wales, but it is also recognising the importance of what might be seen as a strategic energy development. One of more than 350MW is considered to be strategic, whereas one of less than that can be done on a Welsh basis.

We have rightly talked a lot about hydroelectric generation in this debate. I am proud that my constituency has several sites that are open to development for hydro energy production. A 350MW rule would imply that all those developments could be decided upon in Wales, which is a major development. The biggest challenge we would have would be ensuring that the electricity infrastructure to take energy out of the Conwy valley was up to speed.
Hywel Williams: Perhaps this is a mischievous point, but may I ask the Minister this: if 350MW and over is “strategic”, was 50MW and over strategic in the past? If so, what has changed?

Guto Bebb: It should be stated that a former Secretary of State for Wales and former leader of this party had long argued that there was a need to look at a higher limit. It is fair to say that the process of devolution is an ongoing one, and it is highly unreasonable to criticise the fact that we are moving towards a situation where very large developments of hydro power in north Wales could be decided upon in Cardiff.

Paul Flynn: As the process is ongoing, do we not have a responsibility to catch up with information that was not available to the Silk commission? I do not think that the Newport barrage and Cardiff barrage were envisaged at that time. How does it make sense for the Welsh Government to have control over the Swansea lagoon, but not over the Newport and Cardiff lagoons?

Guto Bebb: I am very sympathetic to the concept of tidal lagoons, but, as the hon. Gentleman will be aware, a review is being undertaken at this time and I would not want to prejudge it. It is being undertaken by Charles Hendry, who is well respected across this House.

Clause 37 allows Welsh Ministers to make declarations extinguishing public rights of navigation, so as to ensure safety out to the seaward limits of the territorial sea in relation to generating stations up to 350MW. Clause 38 aligns, in a single authority, the ability to consent both to a generating station itself and the associated overhead line which would connect that station to the transmission system. It does so by removing consenting applicable requirements under either the Electricity Act 1989 or the Planning Act 2008 for certain associated overhead lines with a transmission capacity of up to 132kV necessary for connecting generating stations of up to 350MW capacity. This is an attempt to generate a one-stop shop for energy opportunities of that size in Wales. The Silk commission rightly identified that a one-stop shop should be developed, and the Bill tries to deliver that in a Welsh context.

Government amendments 47 to 49 correct an inadvertent constraint in the current drafting of clause 38 by removing the presumption that Welsh Ministers are the devolved consenting authority.

On clause 39, the Planning Act 2008 introduced the concept of “associated development”—development that the Secretary of State could consent to as part of the development consent orders which underpin and facilitate major development projects. The ability to grant associated development allows for more of the complete projects to be delivered within a single consent, to try to make the situation easier for developers. In Wales, the benefit of this approach has hitherto been restricted only to certain activities around the construction of underground gas storage facilities. Clause 39 amends relevant definitions in the Planning Act 2008 to extend the scope of associated development in Wales to include activities accompanying generating projects above 50MW and larger overhead line connections of 132kV. Again, it fulfils a Silk commission’s recommendation.

I think it is fair to say that amendments 158 to 160, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies), seek to re-open matters which have already been debated in the context of the Energy Act 2016. That Act delivered the Government’s manifesto commitment to give local people the final say on wind farm applications. It also ensured that in Wales it is for the Assembly and Welsh Ministers to decide how decisions are taken. I see no basis for rowing back from that position now, but I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend that the Welsh Government should ensure that local people in Wales have the final say on these matters.

In our discussion of the Bill, we have talked about the importance of financial accountability, but this is also a case of political accountability. In my constituency, Aberconwy, we had the development of the Gwynt y Môr wind farm. I think I am right in saying that every single councillor in the Conwy local authority area voted against the development, but it was imposed by diktat by the then Energy Secretary. The important point is that the changes and the power given to local communities as a result of Acts passed by the coalition Government were a direct response to that political need for change. If the Assembly Government are guilty of taking powers into their own hands, there is political accountability there which needs to be challenged and needs to be part of the political discourse in Wales.

The Energy Act has ended subsidy for new onshore wind. If an onshore wind project does not already have planning permission, it is not going to be eligible for subsidy under the renewables obligation. In all the circumstances, therefore, the amendment should not be pressed to a vote.

Clauses 40 and 41 devolve further powers to Welsh Ministers in respect of equal opportunities. The powers follow as closely as possible the approach adopted in Scotland, but the two approaches are not identical. Clause 40 covers the operation of the public sector equalities duties. It removes the requirement in section 152 of the Equality Act 2010 that the Welsh Ministers consult a Minister of the Crown prior to making an order amending the list of Welsh public authorities that are subject to the duty, replacing it with a requirement to inform.

Clause 41 provides for the commencement and implementation of part 1 of the Equality Act 2010 in Wales. Part 1 imposes a duty on certain public bodies to have due regard to socio-economic considerations when making strategic decisions. Clause 41 allows the Welsh Ministers to bring part 1 into force in Wales on a date of their choosing. It also enables Welsh Ministers to amend the 2010 Act to add or remove relevant authorities that are to be subject to the duty, without first consulting a Minister of the Crown.

Clauses 42 and 43 extend Welsh Ministers’ existing responsibilities for marine licensing and marine conservation in the Welsh inshore region to the Welsh offshore region. The clause fulfils St David’s day commitments and implements recommendations in the Silk commission’s second report.

Clause 44 enables the Secretary of State to intervene on legislation or Executive activities where she has reasonable grounds to believe that these might have a serious adverse impact on sewerage in England. As part of this Bill, legislative competence for sewerage will be
devolved, subject to the matters set out in C15 of new schedule 7A. These powers of intervention are similar to those already held by the Secretary of State in relation to water. They may be used where an Act of the Assembly, or the exercise, or failure to exercise, a relevant function might have a serious adverse impact on sewerage services and systems in England.

Amendments 81, 125 and 126, tabled by the hon. Member for Arfon, seek to take forward the recommendations of the Silk commission in relation to water and sewerage. The Silk report recognised that water and sewerage devolution is complex and that further work to consider the practical implications was needed. The Government set up the Joint Governments Programme Board with the Welsh Government to look at these issues and report on the likely effects that implementing the commission’s recommendations would have on the efficient delivery of water and sewerage services, consumers and the water undertakers themselves. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State explained earlier, that work has concluded and the Government are considering the evidence before deciding whether and how the recommendations will be taken forward. We will consider carefully the interests of customers and businesses on both sides of the border before reaching that decision. It should be stressed that this issue is under consideration.

Liz Saville Roberts: Will this material be available when we are next discussing the Bill? If I remember correctly, I first heard about that working group when we were discussing the 50 years since Capel Celyn. As we are now nine months down the road, it would be appropriate for it to be reported to the House before the Bill comes to the end of its journey.

Guto Bebb: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Her recollection is correct. We have only just received the report, so consideration of it must now take place. It is now with the Wales Office, and, after it has been considered, we will, in the manner described by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, discuss the contents of the report with other parties who have an interest in the Wales Bill.

Clause 45 fulfils a St David’s day commitment and a Silk commission recommendation to devolve to Welsh Ministers the power to make building regulations for “excepted energy buildings” such as generating stations and gas storage facilities. Clause 46 formalises the current differing arrangements for consulting the Welsh Ministers on renewable energy incentive schemes.

Amendments 130 to 132, which were submitted by the Opposition, would require the Secretary of State to gain the consent of Welsh Ministers, rather than to consult them. Energy policy is a reserved matter as regards Great Britain. Maintaining consistency provides for workable schemes, certainty to the industry and fairness to consumers. It is right that responsibility for renewable energy incentive schemes should rest with UK Ministers. I hope that that comment has been welcomed by my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies).

Clause 47 implements for Wales the conclusions of the HM Treasury review of the Office for Budget Responsibility, published last year. The OBR has a statutory duty to carry out a number of core functions, including to produce fiscal and economic forecasts. This clause ensures that it will continue to receive information from Wales as necessary to fulfil that duty. It reflects the increased fiscal devolution to the Assembly, and the Welsh Government’s competence for economic development. These roles mean that the OBR is more likely to require and use information held in Wales to fulfil its remit.

Clause 48 increases the accountability of Ofgem to the Assembly. Clause 49 provides that where a coal operator wants to mine in Wales, it must seek the approval of Welsh Ministers as part of its application for a licence. Clause 50 increases the accountability of Ofgem to the Assembly and Welsh Ministers. It goes further by giving Welsh Ministers the power to appoint one member to the Ofgem board who is capable of representing the interests of Wales.

Clauses 51 and 52 and schedule 5 and 6 make consequential and transitional provision relating to the Bill. Clause 51 allows the Secretary of State to make consequential amendments by regulations in connection with this Bill, and through amendments 82, 144 to 147 and 150 to 154, the Opposition parties are seeking to give the Assembly a role in approving those regulations. Amendments 144 to 147 would require the Assembly also to approve those regulations where such consequential amendments are within the Assembly’s competence or where they alter the Assembly’s competence. Amendments 82 and 150 to 154 would achieve the same with regard to consequential amendments that amend Acts or measures of the Assembly or secondary legislation made by the Welsh Ministers.

Clause 51 is a fairly typical consequential provision that ensures that the Government are able to tidy up the statute book where required in connection with this Bill. Indeed, similar provisions are included in Assembly legislation as well. Giving the Assembly a role in approving the Secretary of State’s regulations made under this clause would be as unjustified as giving Parliament a role in approving Welsh Ministers’ regulations made under Assembly Acts. It would also make the process far more complicated and time consuming than it needs to be. In reality, we would discuss any proposed changes that impacted on the Assembly’s competence with the Welsh Government before regulations were laid.

8.45 pm

Government amendments 50 to 52, 59 and 60 are the result of productive discussions between the Wales Office, the Welsh Government and the Assembly Commission. Paragraph 2(1) of schedule 6 provides that the new reserved powers model will apply only to Assembly Bills that have been introduced, but that have not passed stage 1 in the Assembly’s legislative process before the day on which the reserved powers model comes into force, or that are introduced after that day. Passing stage 1 means that the Assembly has approved the general principles of a Bill.

Paragraph 2(2) of schedule 6 currently provides that an Assembly Bill that has been introduced under the conferred powers model, but that has not passed stage 1 before the day on which the reserved powers model comes into force, would fall. Amendment 59 removes that provision so that a Bill could still proceed under the new reserved powers model, even if it has not passed stage 1.
Amendment 60 introduces tailored transitional provisions into schedule 6 for relevant energy infrastructure applications. Applications that have been formally accepted for examination under the Planning Act 2008 will continue to be determined by the Secretary of State under that Act. Those that have not been formally accepted will be considered by Welsh Ministers under the devolved planning regime.

Amendments 50 to 52 make some sensible and necessary changes to the commencement provisions in clause 53. Let me quickly touch on amendment 52, because the hon. Member for Arfon mentioned it. It ensures that Welsh Ministers’ common law-type powers under clause 17 come into effect at the same time as the new reserved powers model—a change agreed with the Welsh Government.

Clause 53 provides the framework for commencing the provisions of the Bill and for implementing the reserved powers model. Most importantly, subsection (3) provides for the new reserved powers model—at clause 3 and schedules 1 and 2—to come into force on the day appointed by the Secretary of State by regulation. That day is called the “principal appointed day”. The Secretary of State must consult Welsh Ministers and the Presiding Officer before making the regulations that establish the principal appointed day. That is to ensure their views are fully taken into account in determining when the reserved powers model comes into force.

Under subsection (4), the other provisions of the Bill come into force on whatever day the Secretary of State appoints by regulations. That may include the regulations made under subsection (3). Indeed, it is the Government’s intention to bring into force most of the Bill’s provisions devolving further powers to the Assembly and Welsh Ministers at the same time as the reserved powers model—in other words, on the principal appointed day.

Subsection (6) requires the principal appointed day, or a day appointed by regulations made under subsection (4), to be at least four months after the day on which the regulations are made. That is to ensure sufficient time for the Assembly and the Welsh Government to make the appropriate arrangements for the new model. Finally, clause 54 sets out the short title of the Bill as being the Wales Act 2016.

Amendment 12 and new clause 6, which were submitted by the Labour party, seek to quadruple the Welsh Government’s capital borrowing limit, which was set in the Wales Act 2014, from £500 million to £2 billion. There are two considerations in relation to the borrowing limit: ensuring that borrowing is affordable for the Welsh Government and that it is appropriate within the fiscal position of the UK as a whole.

In relation to Welsh Government affordability, it is important to ensure that the Welsh Government have sufficient independent revenues to manage their borrowing costs. We therefore need to consider the balance between devolved tax revenues and borrowing. Had the Wales Act 2014 simply followed the precedent set at the time by the Scotland Act 2012, the Welsh Government would have ended up with a borrowing limit of around £100 million. However, the Government agreed to increase it to £500 million to enable the Welsh Government to proceed with the upgrade to the M4 in Wales—something this Government fully support, although we are still waiting for action from the Government in Cardiff Bay.

The existing borrowing limit is therefore relatively large, compared with the position in the Scotland Act 2012, and I would argue that it goes further. Even taking into account the Welsh rates of income tax, this limit remains relatively large and, therefore, appropriate. The Government do not therefore believe it is right to increase the Welsh Government’s £500 million capital borrowing limit. Even if this position changes in the future, the Wales Act 2014 already provides for the UK Government to increase the Welsh Government’s capital borrowing limit by secondary legislation.

New clause 4, which was spoken to by the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), seeks to assign a share of the VAT revenues generated in Wales to the Welsh Government in the same manner that a share of Scottish VAT revenues will be assigned to the Scottish Government following the Smith agreement. However, the Silk commission gave full consideration to the case for assigning a share of the VAT receipts generated in Wales, and while it recognised some of the arguments in favour, it ultimately recommended against VAT assignment in Wales. Unlike in Scotland, there is no consensus on this issue. I return to the fact that the Bill is moving through this House on the basis of consensus.

As we committed to do in the St David’s day agreement, the Government are considering the case and options for devolving air passenger duty to the Assembly, informed by a review of options to support English regional airports from the potential impacts of APD devolution. However, it is important to note that, as the hon. Gentleman knows to be true, the Silk commission did not recommend the devolving of APD in full, but the devolving of long haul only. It is important to bear in mind that when legislating on devolving a tax such as APD, we have to take into account the impact on other airports within the United Kingdom. We must also take into account whether, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West highlighted, the benefits that might arise for an airport owned by the Welsh Government in south Wales would justify the complexity and difficulties of the devolution process, in the context of the economic development and the transport links of north Wales. I very much doubt that.

We are therefore not of the view that the case has been made for devolving APD at this point, but we will remain open to listening to the arguments in future. I fully understand the importance of the aviation sector for creating jobs and growth in Wales. I think it is fair to say, though, that the hon. Gentleman’s arguments seemed akin to an argument for state aid for a state-owned asset. In the light of the fact that we have just voted to leave the European Union, he seems very keen to adopt the concept of state aid provision. However, the fact that the Welsh Government have decided to buy the airport does not, in itself, make an argument for devolving APD.

New clauses 8 and 9 relate to the devolution of corporation tax. Together, they intend to replicate for Wales the Northern Ireland corporation tax regime, as set out in the Corporation Tax (Northern Ireland) Act 2015, which allows for devolution to the Northern Ireland Assembly of the power to set a Northern Ireland rate of corporation tax for certain trading income. Commencement of this legislation remains dependent on the Executive demonstrating that their finances are
on a sustainable footing. Northern Ireland faces a number of unique challenges that Wales does not. In particular, it has a land border with the very low corporation tax environment in the Republic of Ireland. The Northern Ireland corporation tax model has been specifically designed for Northern Ireland’s economy and needs, and would not be appropriate for Wales. Again, we are saying no to the hon. Gentleman’s claims.

I propose that clauses 22 to 54 and schedules 5 and 6 stand part of the Bill, and that amendments 47 to 52, and 59 and 60 are agreed to. I urge Hon. Members not to press their amendments.

Question put and agreed to.

Clauses 22 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 23 to 35 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

**Clause 36**

**DEVELOPMENT OF CONSENT FOR GENERATING STATIONS WITH 350MW CAPACITY OR LESS**

**Amendment proposed:** 74, page 29, line 17, leave out from “wind” to end of line 18.—(Hywel Williams.)

This amendment removes the 350 megawatts limit on the Welsh Government’s legislative competence in the field of energy.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 195, Noes 275.

**Division No. 39**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AYES</th>
<th>[8.53 pm]</th>
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<tr>
<td>Abrahams, Debbie</td>
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**Tellers for the Ayes:**

Owen Thompson and Marion Fellows

**Tellers for the Noes:**

Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Garnier, Mark
Garnier, Sir Edward
Fysh, Marcus
Fuller, Richard
Freer, Mike
Freeman, George
FREW, Mike
Foster, Kevin
Foster, Mark
Fourie, Roger
Garnier, Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark

Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenhshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burt, rh Alistair
Caims, rh Alun
Camfield, Neil
Cartidge, James
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Colliver, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, rh Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Elwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fernandes, Suella
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark

Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hallon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kris
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Logrest, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
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Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
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Newton, Sarah
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paris, Neil
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Phillip, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Rosalton
Somers, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, lain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
George Hollingbery and
Julian Smith

Question accordingly negatived.
Clause 36 ordered to stand part of the Bill.
Clause 37 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 38

Amendments made: 47, page 32, leave out lines 9 to 12 and insert—
“(2A) Subsection (1) above shall not apply in relation to an electric line that—

(a) has a nominal voltage of 132 kilovolts or less, and
(b) is associated with the construction or extension of a devolved Welsh generating station consented to on or after the day on which section 36 of the Wales Act 2016 comes into force.

(2B) ‘Devolved Welsh generating station’ means a generating station that—

(a) is in Wales and—

(i) generates electricity from wind, or

(ii) has a maximum capacity of 350 megawatts or less; or

(b) is in Welsh waters and has a maximum capacity of 350 megawatts or less.

(2C) ‘Welsh waters’ has the meaning given in section 36 above.”

This amendment provides for consent for the development of electric lines associated with devolved generating stations to be given by Welsh authorities.

Amendment 48, page 32, line 17, leave out

generating station consented to by the Welsh Ministers”

and insert

devolved Welsh generating station consented to on or after the day on which section 36 of the Wales Act 2016 comes into force”.

This amendment provides for consent for the development of electric lines associated with devolved generating stations to be given by Welsh authorities.

Amendment 49, page 32, line 19, at end insert—

“(3C) ‘Devolved Welsh generating station’ means a generating station that—

(a) is in Wales and—

(i) generates electricity from wind, or

(ii) has a capacity of 350 megawatts or less; or

(b) is in waters adjacent to Wales up to the seaward limits of the territorial sea or in the Welsh zone and has a capacity of 350 megawatts or less.

(3D) ‘Welsh zone’ has the meaning given in section 158 of the Government of Wales Act 2006.” —(Alan Cairns.)

This amendment provides for consent for the development of electric lines associated with devolved generating stations to be given by Welsh authorities.

Clause 38, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 39 to 43 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 44

INTERVENTION IN CASE OF SERIOUS IMPACT ON SEWERAGE SERVICES ETC

Amendment proposed: 81, page 34, leave out line 37 to line 5 on page 35 and insert—


This amendment removes the power of the Secretary of State to veto any Welsh legislation or measures that might have a serious adverse impact on water supply or quality in England.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 47, Noes 274.

Division No. 40] [9.6 pm

AYES

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina  Black, Mhairi
Arkless, Richard  Blackford, Ian
Bardell, Hannah  Boswell, Philip

Brock, Deidre  Brown, Alan
Cameron, Dr Lisa  Cherry, Joanna
Cowan, Ronnie  Day, Martyn
Docherty-Hughes, Martin  Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Durkan, Mark  Edwards, Jonathan
Ferrier, Margaret  Gibson, Patricia
Grant, Peter  Gray, Neil
Hendry, Drew  Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum  McCallum, Callum
McDonald, Stuart C.  McGarry, Natalie
McLaughlin, Anne  Monaghan, Dr Paul

NOES

Adams, Nigel  Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter  Allen, Lucy
Allen, Heidi  Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart  Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria  Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett  Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin  Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry  Bercow, Sir John
Beresford, Sir Paul  Berry, Jake
Berry, James  Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob  Blackwood, Nicola
Boles, Nick  Bone, Mr Peter
Bowick, Victoria  Burns, Conor
Bottomley, Sir Peter  Burns, rh Sir Simon
Bradley, Karen  Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew  Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James  Bruce, Fiona
Bruce, Robert  Burns, Robert
Burns, Conor  Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burt, rh Alistair  Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Neil  Carlingtide, James
Caulfield, Maria  Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehan  Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo  Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth  Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey  Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger  Newlands, Gavin
O’Hara, Brendan  Paterson, Steven
Pugh, John  Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Saville Roberts, Liz  Sheppard, Tommy
Stephens, Chris  Thewliss, Alison
Thomson, Michelle  Vaz, rh Keith
Weir, Mike  Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Williams, Hywel  Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri  Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Ayes:  Owen Thompson and Marion Fellows

Coffey, Dr Thérèse  Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto  Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crouch, Tracey  Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris  Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn  Davies, Dr James
Davies, rh Mr David  Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  Donelan, Michelle
Donelan, Michelle  Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver  Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard  Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain  Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael  Ellison, Jane
Elwood, Mr Tobias  Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George  Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel  Evansett, rh Mr David
Fernandes, Suella  Field, rh Mark
Field, rh Mark  Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark  Freeman, George
Freer, Mike  Fuller, Richard
Fyeh, Marcus  Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward  Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Nusrat  Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick  Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac  Goodwill, Mr Robert
Graham, Richard  Grant, Mrs Helen
Amendments made: 59, page 108, line 12, leave out sub-paragraph (2)  
This amendment removes the sub-paragraph which says that an Assembly Bill introduced before the “principal appointed day” falls if it has not passed Stage 1 in the Assembly process by then.  
Amendment 60, page 109, line 34, at end insert—  
‘Development consent for generating stations  
7A (1) The amendments made by sections 36(2) to (6) and 38(4) do not apply in relation to an application acceptance of which is notified to the applicant under section 55 of the Planning Act 2008 before the day on which section 36 of this Act comes into force.  
(2) Schedule 6 to the Planning Act 2008 has effect in relation to orders granting development consent for devolved Welsh generating stations as if—  
(a) references to the Secretary of State were references to the Welsh Ministers;  
(b) the following were omitted—  
(i) paragraph 2(11);  
(ii) paragraph 3(5A);  
(iii) paragraph 4(9);  
(iv) the references to the Lands Tribunal for Scotland in paragraphs 6(6)(a) and 7(3)(d).  
(3) In this paragraph “devolved Welsh generating station” means a generating station that—  
(a) is in Wales and—  
(i) generates electricity from wind, or  
(ii) has a capacity of 350 megawatts or less; or  
(b) is in waters adjacent to Wales up to the seaward limits of the territorial sea or in the Welsh zone (within the meaning of the Government of Wales Act 2006), and has a capacity of 350 megawatts or less.”—(Alan Cairns.)

This amendment creates transitional provision so that applicants accepted by the Secretary of State before the reserved powers model is brought into force will continue to be decided by the Secretary of State under the Planning Act. It also allows the Welsh Ministers to vary consents granted before that time.  
Schedule 6, as amended, agreed to.
Clause 53

COMMENCEMENT

Amendments made: 50, page 39, line 41, at end insert—
“( ) sections 13 and 14;”.

The effect of this amendment is that clause 13 (composition of Assembly committees) and clause 14 (Assembly proceedings: participation by UK Ministers etc.) will come into force two months after Royal Assent.

Amendment 51, page 39, line 42, at end insert—
“... and sections 8 and 9 so far as relating to a provision of a Bill that would change the name of the Assembly or confer power to do so”.

Under this amendment the “super-majority” provisions of the Bill will come into force two months after Royal Assent—as does clause 15, which concerns changes to the name of the Assembly etc.—but only so far as relating to an Assembly Bill providing for a change to the name of the Assembly.

Amendment 52, page 40, line 2, leave out paragraph (d).—(Alan Cairns.)

The effect of this amendment is that clause 17 (functions of Welsh Ministers) will come into force on whatever day the Secretary of State appoints by regulations under clause 53(4), rather than two months after Royal Assent.

Clause 53, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 54 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 2

WELSH THRESHOLDS FOR INCOME TAX

w’(1) Part 4A of the Government Wales Act 2006 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 116A(1)(a) (overview), after “of” insert “and thresholds for”.

(3) After section 116D insert—
“116DA Power to set Welsh thresholds for Welsh taxpayers

(1) The Assembly may by resolution (a “Welsh threshold resolution”) set one or more of the following—
(a) a Welsh threshold for the Welsh basic rate,
(b) a Welsh threshold for the Welsh higher rate,
(c) a Welsh threshold for the Welsh additional rate.

(2) A Welsh threshold resolution applies—
(a) for only one tax year, and
(b) for the whole of that year.

(3) A Welsh threshold resolution—
(a) must specify the tax year for which it applies,
(b) must be made before the start of that tax year, and
(c) must not be made more than 12 months before the start of that year.

(4) If a Welsh threshold resolution is cancelled before the start of the tax year for which it is to apply—
(a) the Income Tax Acts have effect for that year as if the resolution had never been made, and
(b) the resolution may be replaced by another Welsh threshold resolution.

(5) The standing orders must provide that only the First Minister or a Welsh Minister appointed under section 48 may move a motion for a Welsh threshold resolution.”—(Jonathan Edwards.)

This new clause would allow the National Assembly for Wales to determine the income thresholds at which income tax is payable by Welsh taxpayers.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 46, Noes 273.

Division No. 41] [9.18 pm

AYES

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Arkless, Richard
Bardell, Hannah
Black, Mhairi
Boswell, Philip
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Cherry, Joanna
Cowan, Ronnie
Day, Martyn
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Dunkan, Mark
Edwards, Jonathan
Ferrier, Margaret
Gibson, Patricia
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Hendry, Drew
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
McCagg, Callum
McDonald, Stuart C.
McGarry, Natalie

McLaughlin, Anne
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Newlands, Gavin
O’Hara, Brendan
Paterson, Steven
Pugh, John
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sheppard, Tommy
Stephens, Chris
Thewliss, Alison
Thomson, Michelle
Vaz, rh Keith
Weir, Mike
Whiteford, Dr Elibird
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Ayes:
Owen Thompson and
Marion Fellows

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Cartlidge, James
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Dowell, Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Elwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Wales Bill

Question accordingly negatived.
The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.
Bill, as amended, reported.
Bill to be considered tomorrow.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

PETROLEUM

That the draft Petroleum (Transfer of Functions) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 26 May, be approved.—(George Hollingbery.)

Question agreed to.

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

WATER INDUSTRY

That the draft Water and Sewerage Undertakers (Exit from Non-household Retail Market) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 26 May, be approved.—(George Hollingbery.)

Question agreed to.
Great Western Railway’s Bicycle Policy

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

9.30 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I am going to tell the House a story about myself—although it is not just about me but about the thousands of people who use the Great Western Railway service every year, and the many thousands who have signed a petition protesting about its so-called new policy.

I have not owned a car for more than 20 years. Before being elected to the House and every week since then, I have cycled from this place to Paddington railway station, put my bicycle on a train, travelled back to Exeter, taken my bicycle off the train, and gone about my constituency business. At the end of the weekend, I have done the same in reverse. First Great Western—or Great Western Railway, as it has now rebranded itself—has had a perfectly good and workable cycling policy, which has encouraged people to book a space in advance but has allowed people such as me to turn up and, if there is space in the cycling carriage, to put their bicycles on board. There is a designated space at the front of the train, with room for six bicycles.

In the nearly 20 years for which I have represented Exeter in the House, I have generally not reserved a space. I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of occasions on which I have arrived at Paddington or Exeter and not been able to get my bike on to a train because it has been full. There are nearly always spaces in the cycle carriages. So the House will understand why, when I was told by a Great Western Railway employee at Exeter station in April that the company was about to introduce a compulsory booking system for people with bicycles, I was somewhat concerned. I immediately asked to speak to a senior manager, who reassured me that this was not the case, and that discretion would be allowed. However, I took the precaution of writing to the managing director of Great Western Railway asking him to repeat that assurance. I explained to him the scenario that I have just outlined: it seemed to me to be ridiculous—Orwellian, even—that if people turned up at a station with a bicycle and there were spaces in the carriage designed for carrying bicycles, they should not be allowed to take their bicycle with them.

The managing director gave me a very reassuring response. On 26 April, he wrote:

“We understand that there will be times when booking is not possible and space is available on board.”

Booking, of course, is not possible for people like me, and many of the thousands of other people who do not know what train they will be able to catch. The business of the House is very unpredictable, as are my constituency commitments.

The managing director went on to say:

“Station staff have been briefed to allow bikes on board if this is the case, and we are checking that this message has reached colleagues, and you should not therefore have any issues travelling without booking a space for your cycle if there is space on board.”

That was back in April. I have to say that, in spite of that reassurance from Mark Hopwood, I was subsequently inundated with emails, letters, tweets and Facebook messages from other people in my position, who told me that they had encountered difficulty getting their bikes on to a train without a reservation, even when there were spaces on board.

I wrote my letter to Mr Hopwood from a train on which I had put my bicycle, without a reservation, and there were spaces on board. To this day, at many Great Western Railway stations, there are signs and tannoy announcements saying “You cannot put your bike on this train unless you have a reservation”. That is a lie. It is not true. It is not the policy, as Mr Hopwood told me in his letter. But it is still being represented as the policy at stations, in tannoy announcements and in messages. So it is not surprising that there is confusion among GWR staff.

I was then contacted by a constituent of the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie), who has also been lobbied on this. Sadly, she is unwell and cannot be here today. Her constituent had received a missive from another GWR management member that completely contradicted the assurance I had been given by Mr Hopwood. He said: “To be clear, we require you to reserve your bicycle on our high-speed trains, as our publicity states.” He went on to say, or to imply, that this was about preparing for the introduction of new high-speed trains, which we are very much looking forward to serving our part of the world in the far south-west. I understand, however—the Minister may like to clarify this in her reply—that they are not due to come into service for another two years, so I was not quite sure why he was preparing for this event.

Simon Pritchard goes on to explain in his email that the reason they are doing this is that in the new high-speed trains the cycle spaces, instead of being in a designated carriage at the front of the train, will be in three separate areas along the train—two in each area, or more if the train is longer—so in order to try and avoid the chaos and confusion that would ensue from people trying to get their bikes on a train if they had not booked, they were trying to encourage people to book in advance. That is all very well, and I will come back to it in a moment.

Another problem that has exacerbated this whole issue is that it is incredibly difficult and clunky to book a bicycle on a train. People either have to telephone, although the telephone service operates only within certain working hours, or they can book online, but that can be done only when booking a ticket. So the only way people returning from a journey who already have a ticket can book is by phone, which, as I have said, does not operate for many hours of the week, or by going to a station. Of course, that is massively inconvenient for customers.

I went back to Mr Hopwood to seek clarification. I applied for this Adjournment debate, too, in the hope that this might make something happen. Indeed, as is so often the case when one secures an Adjournment debate, I received another letter from Mr Hopwood today, written last Friday, which is moderately reassuring. He has invited me to a meeting with cycling groups, which I am very happy to take up. He says that this discretion of people being allowed to take their bicycles on a train without a booking will continue, and implies it will do so until the new trains are introduced. He goes on to say they are working on a reservation system that will allow customers to take a bike on a train independently from their ticket purchase at short notice, even after the train
has started its journey. Up until now, people have only been able to book a bike on a train up to two hours before that train has started its journey. On the long journey from Penzance to Paddington that is completely impractical because by the time the train has started its journey and someone has decided what time train they are going to get, the train has already left the station at Penzance so they cannot book their bike on. He also says that there will be an online service, a telephone service and service at stations and that they hope to have this facility available to customers by the start of the December timetable.

That is a welcome improvement and concession by GWR, which I am convinced has happened only as a result of the pressure put on it by customers who have used its service over the years. Mr Hopwood then argues that this will provide the flexibility cyclists have asked for and allow bookings to be made much closer to departure. If that is the case, it is an improvement. However, he also goes on to claim that the requirement to book space on long-distance services is not unusual and he says that other railway companies—he quotes more than three, but the three I am concentrating on are the three I know: CrossCountry, Greater Anglia and South West Trains—also have mandated bicycle reservations.

Well, I can tell Mr Hopwood that I took my bicycle on a CrossCountry service on Saturday without a reservation. I have taken it up to Norwich on Greater Anglia in the past six months without a reservation, and I have also taken it on South West Trains without a reservation in the past six months, so what he says is simply not the case. At a time when we should be encouraging people to use sustainable transport and to travel sustainably, rail companies should be bending over backwards to encourage people to use their bicycles.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for securing the debate and absolutely agree with everything he has said so far. Does he agree that it was clear from the Get Britain Cycling inquiry that he and I served on in the previous Parliament that active travel to work is a key aspect of encouraging people to get cycling, and that the health benefits that that brings are not in dispute?

Mr Bradshaw: Yes, I completely agree. I have described the system as Orwellian partly because of the confusion and the contradictory messages that are being given to the public, but the hon. Lady is exactly right that this is a moment in our history when we should be encouraging people to use sustainable transport and to take their bikes on trains. If there is space on trains, people should be allowed to put their bikes on to them.

This is a classic example of a big organisation announcing a policy without consulting any of the people who use the service and without thinking through its implications and repercussions. It then has to backtrack and try to clarify the situation, but does not really clarify it properly. It ends up thinking, “Oh dear, we’ve got ourselves into a bit of a mess here. How are we going to get out of this?” If only it had consulted the people who actually use the service, it could have avoided this situation. I can think of many examples of this happening in public life. I am sure that the Minister, who has a lot on her plate at the moment, can think of some as well.

The company has introduced this mandatory reservation system, which turns out not to be mandatory, in advance of the introduction of the new trains, but why on earth did it not wait until the trains were actually introduced? Instead, it has introduced the policy now, which has been confusing and might put people off taking their bikes on trains. It is okay for me because I have this letter from Mr Hopwood saying that I can take my bike on a train without a reservation if there is space for it. I have put a copy of it on my iPhone so that if I ever have any problems, I can flash it at the guard and say, “Look, I have an assurance from your boss that this is okay.” I have also put a photograph of the letter on Twitter and elsewhere. For the ordinary tourist or non-regular traveller, however, the policy will be a real deterrent to their doing exactly what the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) has said is the right thing to do.

I ask Great Western Railway to issue a clear, comprehensive clarification of its policy, and to make it absolutely clear publicly in the notices that it puts in railway stations and in the announcements on the tannoy, which are still inaccurate, that people can still put a bicycle on its trains without a reservation until the new trains are introduced. Also, as I mentioned a moment ago, Mr Hopwood is wrong about the practice on CrossCountry, Greater Anglia and South West Trains. Those trains already have a system whereby bicycles can be accommodated, with two at the front, two in the middle and two at the back. That is the system that Great Western is about to introduce. It is not difficult for someone to put their bicycle on a train if there is a space for it; they just need to move up and down the platform and put it into the space. This idea that people should be required to book in advance because of the new configuration of the trains, even if no one else has booked and spaces are available, is Orwellian and against the whole thrust of Government policy.

I hope that the Minister, given all the other problems on the railways that she is facing, will be able to have a quiet word with Great Western Railway and sort this issue out to reassure people who, like me, have been using the system perfectly happily for many years. This unnecessary change has created an almighty mess and confusion, and I hope that she will be able to get Great Western to see sense.

9.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): I thank the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) for his long-term commitment to using the railways—like me, he is an assiduous user of Great Western Railway—and to cycling. There is a reason why the right hon. Gentleman looks as good as he does; I imagine that a lot of it is down to him cycling around the Exeter hills and dales. His commitment to his constituents is great. This debate is a perfect example of how something that might seem quite minor to many will be important to a relatively small number of people. By calling a debate and focusing on the issue, changes can actually happen. I want to address some of the main points and then some of the facts that the right hon. Gentleman said that he heard from the company.

It is not for the Government to specify every exact detail of a franchise holder’s interaction with its customers, but we set out the broad direction of travel, which is that customers with bicycles must be permitted on
trains. I am the first to recognise the importance of sustainable travel, which my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) mentioned, and of joining up cycling and railway experiences as part of decarbonising our transport sector and contributing to good health.

For many years, various policies have been applied across the country. We have benefited from the 40-year-old high-speed trains that have that wonderful guard's van. They are almost an anachronism, but they have meant that cyclists can put their bikes all in one place in a way that is relatively easy to manage.

The right hon. Gentleman has experience of other operators, but it seems as though Great Western Railway is falling in line with other long-distance operators, including Virgin Trains East Coast and Virgin's west coast franchise, that require reservations for all or part of some of their services. When its policy is implemented, 70% of Great Western Railway's services will still take bicycles without a reservation.

When I was on the platform of Pewsey station on Saturday waiting to catch the 8.12 up to London, I heard the announcement mentioned by the right hon. Gentleman. I tend to read my ministerial box in advance, so I thought that I must mention it in my response to his debate. The announcement did make it sound as though the policy was mandatory, but what he knows, and what Great Western Railway has been at pains to point out, is that this is, in a way, rolling the turf for the introduction of the new intercity express programme trains, which we are all very much looking forward to. They will not have the guard's van, but will instead have cycle spaces dotted around the carriage formations. The right hon. Gentleman says that it is perfectly okay for cyclists to push their bikes up and down, but we want the trains to run on time. We therefore want the loading of people, luggage and bicycles to be as efficient as possible, so there is some merit in the reservation system. The new trains will have more seats, more spaces and more frequent services to the right hon. Gentleman's constituency, and we are all looking forward to that.

Although I am looking to Great Western Railway to solve these issues, I was particularly interested to hear about the right hon. Gentleman's experience of the implementation, because the policy does sound confusing and inconsistent. I have heard from the company that it absolutely recognises those points. It has no doubt been nuded by the right hon. Gentleman's campaigning and by his securing of this debate, as it is improving its booking system. I went online myself and found that it is possible to reserve a cycle space when making an advance booking, but it is not possible to book if someone is not quite sure which train they will be taking. I welcomed the company's announcement that it will have a system in place by December through which people can make bicycle reservations almost as they show up to the station. I had also heard that the phone system was inadequate, so I was pleased to hear from the company that it has changed suppliers. No longer will it be sending calls over to India; they will be dealt with onshore. The right hon. Gentleman and other keen cyclists should be able to look forward to better, more consistent contact with the call centre.

It is important to recognise that the company, like many others, is doing a lot to invest in cycling, in addition to providing new cycle spaces on the new trains. I am intrigued about looking at new ways of solving this problem, because I find that although there are dedicated cycle spaces on many trains, and many rail users have folding bikes which can, in theory, fit in overhead compartments, all too often people will be on trains with bikes stuck in the aisles—that occurs particularly on crowded commuter trains going up the east coast. It would be great to see some innovation in rolling stock to allow bicycles to be accommodated in a different way, so I am encouraging the industry to think about how to do that.

I also recognise that companies are working hard to encourage people to cycle to stations and then leave their bikes there. I suspect that the right hon. Gentleman is in a minority in actually bringing his bike up to London. That shows what a dedicated cyclist he is, as many others have their bikes in the station. It is noteworthy that the company has already invested in 750 cycle spaces in the past two years and secured funding for another 600 spaces at 21 stations. It is also working with bike hire companies and on Brompton docks in many locations, as well as supporting a new innovative hire scheme at Bainton Bikes in Oxford, which uses Danish technology—in essence we are talking about a dedicated hire bike that can be secured to a regular, stand-alone cycle rack. That has lots of applications right across the country.

The company that we are discussing, like many others, is committed to improving the experience of cyclists who use its services, but I take the right hon. Gentleman's points very seriously. I commend him for securing the debate and for making changes happen with the company already. As a keen cyclist, albeit not one who is brave enough to take my bike on the trains, and a keen user of Great Western Railway, I will be watching the implementation of and improvements to this policy with great interest.

Question put and agreed to.

9.51 pm

House adjourned.
One of the things Jo was passionate about was justice for the Palestinians. According to the UN, Israel has demolished 649 Palestinian structures this year, and 1,000 people—over 400 of them children—have been displaced. The situation is getting worse, not better. I know that the Minister condemns these things, but if Israel feels it can continue with a culture of impunity, why should it stop? What can the international community do to show Israel that it does not have impunity, and what specific actions would the UK Government support?

Mr Ellwood: Thank you very much for those initial comments. We agree and we are hugely concerned about the rate of demolitions. We need to place additional pressure on Israel and, indeed, the Palestinians to come to the table. I am pleased that we held a summit in Paris to discuss the overarching challenges that we face and the role that the international community can play. The extent of the demolitions was highlighted in the Quartet report, produced by Russia, the US, the EU and the UN, which underlines the very concerns that the hon. Gentleman has outlined.

Sir Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I, too, would like to associate myself with the Minister’s moving words about our late colleague, Jo Cox. As for the general point, my hon. Friend is quite right when he says that this will not help in moving towards a position in which people come together to talk. There is, however, the other side of the coin, with 36 Israelis, along with four foreign nationals, murdered this year. Instead of condemning the murders, the Palestinian Authority glorified them. Surely, when just this weekend the Israeli Prime Minister said that he would meet without conditions, we should urge the Palestinian authorities to do precisely that and have direct talks.

Mr Ellwood: My right hon. Friend raises a very important issue. We regularly raise and discuss these matters at Foreign Office questions. Now that we have had the Paris summit and seen a meeting between Prime Minister Netanyahu and Egyptian Foreign Minister Shoukry, we can see this issue coming back on to the table. I am pleased that we held a summit in Paris to discuss the overarching challenges that we face and the role that the international community can play. The extent of the demolitions was highlighted in the Quartet report, produced by Russia, the US, the EU and the UN, which underlines the very concerns that the hon. Gentleman has outlined.
Mr Ellwood: I will certainly look into the case that the hon. Lady raises. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is concerned about the treatment of Palestinian children detained in Israeli prisons and has raised it with the United States Secretary of State, John Kerry, and I raised it during my recent visit to Israel. We have done some work—and, indeed, have invested some funds—to ensure that the children are looked after in the best possible way.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The demolition of Arab houses, and of Jewish houses, was started by us, the British, between the wars, during the operation of the terms of the British mandate for Palestine. Today, the Israeli Government specifically cites British mandate law as a justification for the current demolitions. Has the Minister had conversations with his Israeli counterpart about the legitimacy of using that law today?

Mr Ellwood: Given our legacy and the breadth of our influence over the last couple of hundred years, I think it wrong for any Government in the world to point to British policy and say that, historically, it is the cause. All laws can be updated, and both sides have a responsibility to come together and resolve this matter for the long term.

Embassies

2. Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): What guidance he issues to British embassies on whether they are obliged to respond to inquiries from the company directly. I can only apologise for the delay in providing the normal level of support that we would expect to give any company wishing to do business in Morocco or, indeed, anywhere else.

Mr Ellwood: One of my constituents has written to a certain embassy many times, and, although it acknowledges his correspondence, he has never received any further response, which is preventing him from fulfilling an important part of a significant business deal. Could the Minister provide any assistance by obtaining a full response from the embassy on behalf of my constituent, so that he can be given more information?

Mr Ellwood: I was aware of that case, and I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising it. If any other Members are concerned about a lack of support from embassies for businesses in their constituencies, will they please let us know?

I understand that the head of UKTI in Morocco, with which the company concerned wishes to trade, has been speaking to the company directly. I can only apologise for the delay in providing the normal level of support that we would expect to give any company wishing to do business in Morocco or, indeed, anywhere else.

Departmental Trade Specialists

3. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Whether his Department plans to recruit more trade specialists as a result of the outcome of the EU referendum.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): Let me begin by welcoming the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) to her new post, along with her compact team—a model, I hope, of improved productivity in the UK economy, although time will tell.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced last month, the Government are creating a new EU unit which will bring together the brightest and best from Whitehall and the private sector, including lawyers, financial experts and trade experts. The Government are actively seeking to recruit trade specialists, and that includes approaching former civil servants who have retired or moved to the private sector.

Mr Cunningham: I thank the Foreign Secretary for that answer, but can he tell the House how much this is going to cost?

Mr Hammond: No, not at this stage, but what I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that in the circumstances in which we find ourselves, facing the opportunities we now do, recruitment of trade specialists, whatever that costs us, is likely to be an investment very well worth making.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Is the Foreign Secretary heartened by the fact that since we voted to leave the EU a number of key countries and economies, including India, China and Australia, have approached the UK regarding furthering trade, and how well that compares with the stalled trade talks that have taken many years between the EU and such countries as the US and Canada?

Mr Hammond: Yes, it is a source of some optimism that a number of significant economies around the world have indicated that they would be open to the idea of trade agreements with the UK, and my hon. Friend makes a point that is very obvious but none the
less important: that negotiating a trade deal between two countries is always going to be much easier than negotiating a trade deal between one country and 28 countries.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Last week at the Foreign Affairs Committee Oliver Letwin stated that “we clearly need a new cadre of highly skilful and highly experienced trade negotiators.”

I hope the Secretary of State sees the irony in the fact that the very best of our trade negotiators are based in Brussels, but can he assure the House that from now on we will indeed bring in the best trade negotiators notwithstanding their nationality?

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Lady had in mind the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin). I am not sure I recognised the name she mentioned.

Mr Hammond: I was puzzling about that myself and am grateful for your clarification, Mr Speaker, and, having had it, I am very happy to answer the hon. Lady’s question. As I said in response to the initial question, we will need to hire significant numbers of trade negotiators and—I said this in the House a couple of weeks ago—I see no reason why we would not hire people who were non-British if they were the best people to do the job. Clearly, one would not want to hire a citizen of another country to negotiate a trade deal with that country, but having entered that caveat, I would hope we put together the best and most capable teams from wherever.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I am sure the Foreign Secretary will agree that the Prime Minister’s trade envoys have played a very important role around the world. As our relationship with the EU changes, will he make representations to ensure that that programme is rolled out across Europe as well?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend raises a good point, and that will of course be an issue for the new Prime Minister as trade envoys are personal appointments of the Prime Minister.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary agree with the assessment of a former permanent secretary of the Foreign Office that to deal with the legal and political complexities of leaving the EU the Foreign Office will need to double in size?

Mr Hammond: I absolutely recognise there is a huge and complex task ahead of us in negotiating both our exit from the EU and, perhaps more importantly, the new arrangements Britain will have with the EU 27, but this is a project that will have a limited duration: once the negotiations are completed the task will be done, and I am not sure increasing the size of the Foreign Office will necessarily be the most appropriate way of doing that. Having a specialist unit to deal with this short to medium-term task may well be the most efficient way of delivering the outcome.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): The incoming Prime Minister told us yesterday that she intends to make a success of Brexit and part of that is clearly going to be trade talks with countries throughout the world. Has the message already gone out to our embassies and high commissions that even before Brexit happens initial talks about trade should start with other countries?

Mr Hammond: The message that has gone out is that Britain will need to redouble its efforts in international trade and refocus where the trade is concentrated in the future. I should also make it clear that until we have served an article 50 notice, we remain a full participating member of the European Union. Our ability to negotiate new trade agreements is restricted by the continued application of EU law until we have negotiated our exit from the European Union, so we have to tread a careful path. Of course we can have preliminary discussions, but we must ensure that we remain on the right side of our international obligations at all times.

Human Rights: China

4. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Chinese Government on the promotion of human rights in that country. [905811]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): We regularly raise human rights with the Chinese authorities. I most recently discussed human rights with the Chinese ambassador a fortnight ago, and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed the human rights dialogue with State Councillor Yang last week. In addition, my right hon. Friend raised concerns last month with the president of the Supreme People’s Court about the detention of human rights defenders.

Jeff Smith: Following the UK’s withdrawal from the EU, we will need to develop a new set of trading relationships with China. What reassurances can the Minister give me that that process will not diminish our ability or our resolve to publicly condemn the Chinese Government for human rights abuses?

Mr Swire: The hon. Gentleman will know that we are very keen to get a date for the annual human rights dialogue. That is the right architecture within which to raise individual cases. However, we will continue to raise individual cases of human rights abuse, and if there is no human rights dialogue, we will have to increase that.

22. [905829] Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Can the Minister tell us exactly what action he is taking to question the Chinese Government about their brutal persecution of those who peacefully practise Falun Gong, particularly in relation to the live harvesting of organs?

Mr Swire: We have raised concerns about reports of organ harvesting, as well as about the torture and mistreatment of detainees, during the annual UK human rights dialogue. We will continue to do that at the next round. Equally, we pay close attention to the human rights situation in China and we remain extremely concerned about restrictions placed on freedom of religion or belief of any kind, including Falun Gong practitioners.
Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I should like to associate myself with the Minister’s remarks about Jo Cox, the MP who tragically lost her life. She was a fellow colleague from the 2015 intake. She was an advocate for refugees and a fierce and passionate champion of the dispossessed. We miss her very much at FCO questions, and her memory inspires us all as parliamentarians to work selflessly for those whose voice is rarely heard.

In relation to the human rights situation in China, Amnesty International has stated that at least 248 human rights lawyers and activists have been targeted by the authorities over the past year. They include the prominent lawyer, Wang Yu. She and 12 others are now under formal arrest on charges of subverting state power. What is the Minister’s assessment of this targeting of human rights activists? Does he agree that, on occasion, the Government’s approach lacks assertiveness in relation to human rights in China?

Mr Swire: I should like to associate myself with the hon. Lady’s first remarks, but I dissociate myself from her concluding remark. I believe that, on balance, we have got the situation just about right. We are concerned about the human rights lawyers and we continue to raise the issue. Most recently, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary did so with the president of the Supreme People’s Court of China, Zhou Qiang, on 9 June. He has also raised our concerns with the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, and we will continue so to do.

EU Withdrawal Negotiations

5. Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): If he will ensure that the Scottish Government are included in negotiations on the withdrawal of the UK from the EU.

Mr Hammond: As we do with other matters, we will consult the Scottish Government both formally and through informal dialogue, including at senior official level on an ongoing basis.

Stephen Gethins: The Scottish Government have been clear that EU nationals must be a priority. Given their net financial contribution, does the Foreign Secretary agree that EU nationals should be more of a priority than new nuclear weapons? Any new Chancellor should be especially mindful of that.

Mr Hammond: I am unsure whether the two issues need to be prioritised. They can both be pursued in parallel. The decision to renew our nuclear deterrent is quite separate from the negotiations that we will be having with the EU, including negotiations to ensure the rights of EU nationals living in the UK and the reciprocal rights of UK nationals living in EU countries.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Regardless of whether the Scottish Government are involved in the negotiations, will the Secretary of State confirm that the negotiations are purely about us leaving the EU and not some sort of renegotiation of our terms of membership that will result in a halfway house where we are half-in and half-out of the EU?

Mr Hammond: Yes, I can confirm that. The next Prime Minister has made it clear that Brexit means Brexit: we will be negotiating our exit from the EU. However, we will of course also seek to negotiate an agreement between the United Kingdom and the EU 27 to regulate our trade and other relationships with the EU.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that it would be far better for Scotland to play a productive role in securing a new relationship between the UK and the EU, rather than looking to join as a new member, get the euro and put a border across this island?

Mr Hammond: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. Scotland’s best future is in a strong United Kingdom, trading effectively with the EU. We saw the case for independence during the previous referendum—it did not stack up at $100 a barrel of oil and it certainly does not stack up at $50 a barrel.

19. [905826] Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Highlands and islands currently benefit from an additional £192 million of transition funding. Given the incoming Prime Minister’s haste to get on with Brexit, will the Secretary of State confirm that the UK Government will guarantee that funding?

Mr Hammond: Britain is a significant net contributor to the EU, but that contribution includes a significant number of flows to particular regions, areas, projects and bodies within the United Kingdom. We will have to address how the recipients of those flows of funds from Brussels are to be protected in the future and that will be an important part of the negotiations.

Owen Thompson: While that answer is encouraging, it does not exactly give a lot of detail—much like the plans of the Brexiteers as they went into the referendum. What formal role will the Scottish Government and the other devolved Governments have in the process of formalising Brexit?
Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Scotland has benefited from access to EU research and a wealth of talented researchers and academics. The Guardian worriedly reported this morning:

“Britain’s vote to leave the EU has unleashed a wave of discrimination against UK researchers”.

Scottish universities and their staff are concerned. What is the Foreign Secretary’s message to the universities, research staff and workers that benefit from being part of the EU? How will he ensure that Scotland and its interests are protected?

Mr Hammond: This issue is not just about Scotland; it is much wider than that. I will say two things. First, as long as we are a full member of the EU and are paying the full sub, we must ensure that there is no discrimination against the UK, UK institutions, UK applicants for funding or UK citizens. Secondly, the point of negotiating an arrangement for Britain’s relationship with the EU 27 after we have left the EU is precisely to protect collaborative research, educational projects and cultural exchanges in addition to our important trading relationships.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): May I begin by thanking the Foreign Secretary for welcoming me to this new job? It is right to say that we are a compact team, but we have the advantage of being made up of two blessed difficult women, and so we are formidable and up for the task. If rumours of promotion are true, this may be my final session with him before he takes another job. It would seem that everyone is in flux. He has a reputation of being a formidable but approachable Minister to shadow, so I will be sorry if our acquaintance is so brief.

The Foreign Secretary rightly said that he has given assurances that he will consult Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, London and Gibraltar on the Government’s negotiating strategy for Brexit prior to triggering article 50. Will those assurances also apply in respect of Her Majesty’s Opposition, to ensure that the needs and concerns of the communities we represent are reflected as the Government develop their negotiating strategy?

Mr Hammond: First, I am surprised to hear the hon. Lady saying that she expects promotion. I thought that those in the Labour party who were expecting promotion threw their hat in the ring yesterday—perhaps she is going to be a late entrant to that competition. On the substance of her question, of course there will be extensive discussion about all these issues in Parliament. The Opposition will have an opportunity to present their views, and we shall listen carefully to them.

Emily Thornberry: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but I was hoping that I would get greater assurance than that and that there would be formal consultation with Her Majesty’s Opposition prior to the start of negotiations. We must avoid the mistakes made by the outgoing Prime Minister before his resignation. He had no proper consultation with Opposition parties, no proper discussion took place and there was a totally artificial timetable. Had the Prime Minister done those things, perhaps he would have got a better and more inclusive deal, the country might not have voted for Brexit and he might not be stepping down tomorrow. Does the Foreign Secretary not accept that the Prime Minister made a mistake and can he guarantee that those mistakes will not be made by the new Prime Minister?

Mr Hammond: Perhaps I dare say to the hon. Lady that I might have been a bit closer to those negotiations than she was and I can confidently say that engaging with the Opposition would not have affected the outcome.

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, but the questions and answers are taking too long. [Interruption.] Order. What we need now is a couple of pithy inquiries, not elongated ones.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): The whole of Scotland is deeply concerned about the personal future of the Foreign Secretary, given his apocalyptic statements during the recent referendum. For example, he told Chatham House on 2 March that leaving would take longer to negotiate “than the second world war.”

Will it take longer to negotiate Brexit than the second world war? How would any future Chancellor of the Exchequer deal with such uncertainty?

Mr Hammond: I think the right hon. Gentleman will recognise that the concern is this: if a future treaty between the United Kingdom and the European Union 27 is deemed to be a mixed competence, it will have to be ratified by 27 national Parliaments. I believe I am right in saying that the shortest time in which that has been done in respect of any EU treaty is just under four years—that is after taking into account the time it takes to negotiate.

Alex Salmond: That is a yes then. Did the Foreign Secretary see the poll at the weekend carried out by YouGov across European countries? It showed two things: first, that the UK Government were deeply unpopular in every other European country; and, secondly, that massive majorities of the public in every country surveyed were looking forward to an independent Scotland within Europe. Why are the UK Government so unpopular, and why is Scotland so popular in Europe?

Mr Hammond: I would have thought if there was one lesson to take from the events of the past three weeks, it was, “Do not read polls”.

Bangladesh

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): What steps he is taking to support political liberty, freedom of expression and human rights in Bangladesh.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): Our condolences go to the victims and the families of those involved in the horrific and cowardly terrorist attack in Dhaka on 1 July. Where credible allegations of human rights abuses exist, we raise them with the Bangladesh Government. Bangladesh is named as one of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s 30 human rights priority countries. The British Government also fund a number of programmes that support civil society in Bangladesh.
Andrew Stephenson: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Supporters of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist party have told me that hundreds of its party workers have now disappeared, and Amnesty International referred to at least 43 enforced disappearances in its latest international report. Whatever the true number, does he agree that the political situation in Bangladesh is now extremely serious and it is vital that political rights are protected?

Mr Swire: Yes, I agree, and I condemn all forms of violence and excessive use of force. Equally, we made it clear in public and in private that justice must be done in a manner that fully respects the international human rights standards to which Bangladesh has signed up.

Andrew Gwyne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Human Rights Watch identified Bangladesh as having the highest rate of child marriage. This is a fundamental breach of human rights, particularly for those girls who are forced into marriage at such an early age. What are the Government doing to make their views known to the Bangladesh Government, and through the Commonwealth and other organisations, that such practice is not acceptable?

Mr Swire: Clearly, it is not acceptable, and we continue to have a robust dialogue with the Bangladesh Government. We are also a significant aid donor working on some of these projects in that country.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Hindu priests have been brutally murdered and other religious minorities savaged. What actions has my right hon. Friend taken to inform the Bangladeshi Government that that is completely unacceptable and that they have to face up to their responsibilities?

Mr Swire: Indeed. I can only repeat what I have just said. We have robust discussions with the Government of Bangladesh. We are extremely concerned about the situation in that country, not least because of its connections with Daesh and other organisations and its basic human rights as well.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): What specific representations has the Minister made to the Government of Sheikh Hasina following the brutal murders in the diplomatic enclave of Gulshan in Dhaka? The area should have been very secure, and yet those murderers and terrorists were allowed in to murder 20 people on 1 July.

Mr Swire: The Prime Minister wrote to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on 2 July to extend his condolences. I spoke to Foreign Minister Ali on 5 July to express my condemnation of this senseless act of horror.

Anglo-Indian Relations

7. Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the strength of diplomatic and economic relations between India and the UK.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): Our relations with India remain extremely good. Only this week, I spoke to a high-level group of Indian businessmen here in the United Kingdom, and of course they wanted to know what is happening now with our relationship with India following the recent referendum.

Alex Chalk: For individuals and businesses in Cheltenham, the UK’s relationship with India is increasingly important. How will it change post-Brexit?

Mr Swire: We still have in this country 1.5 million Indians or people of Indian descent, so the connections are huge and robust. People come to the UK a lot and people go to India a lot. Clearly, early talks about the shape of our trade relationship with India will form part of our discussions over the next year or so.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): On the diplomatic front, what discussions has the Minister had with the Indian Government about the recent events in Kashmir?

Mr Swire: We are very saddened by the recent reports of unrest in Kashmir and we offer our condolences to the victims and their families. Our high commission in Delhi is monitoring the situation closely, and we have updated our travel advice accordingly.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I am delighted that my right hon. Friend referenced the fact that discussion about a future trade relationship will take place in parallel with our exit negotiations from the European Union. What kind of capability does he need to recruit to his Department to get into the detail of those discussions?

Mr Swire: My hon. Friend will know that trade policy is with UK Trade & Investment, but I will repeat what my right hon. Friend said earlier. We are aware that we need to recruit and retain more trade negotiators. We are still a member of the EU until the last of the negotiations have taken place, but there is absolutely no reason not to start having exploratory talks, and we are beginning to do that.

Middle East Peace Talks

8. Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to support the French initiative to start peace talks between Israel and Palestine. [R]

Mr Swire: Until this week, my right hon. Friend referenced the fact that discussion about a future trade relationship will take place in parallel with our exit negotiations from the European Union. What kind of capability does he need to recruit to his Department to get into the detail of those discussions?

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The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): As I mentioned earlier, I attended the French ministerial conference on the middle east peace process in Paris on 3 June. We are in close contact with the French Government and will consider how the UK might contribute as their plans develop.

Andy Slaughter: It is a pity that the Foreign Secretary could not attend that conference. Will he be attending or advising his successor to attend the main conference later this year, and will he join France and other European
countries in recognising Palestine if Israel refuses to co-operate with the French initiative and continues building settlements?

Mr Ellwood: To make it clear, the summit was moved at short notice to accommodate the US Secretary of State. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was in Africa at the time, which was why I was able to attend. I hope the hon. Gentleman does not feel short-changed by the fact that I was there instead of the Foreign Secretary. It was an important meeting, as it registered the need for the international community to play its part and we look forward to moving ahead with the process. Discussions will take place in the next few months to bring the parties together.

Ms Ritchie: In the light of recent moves by the Egyptian Foreign Minister, does the Minister believe that the chances for successful peace talks are improving? What efforts will the Government make to ensure that both Israel and Palestine are sufficiently incentivised to come to the table to talk?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady is right to say that both parties need to be sufficiently incentivised. The worry that I have had when visiting both the Palestinian areas and Israel is that the leaders on both sides are not necessarily speaking for the people, who generally want something different. My concern is that unless we see the affirmative steps taking place to reverse the trends that we have been seeing, we will drift towards an entrenched position of a one-state reality, with perpetual occupation and conflict.

Refugee Crisis

9. Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What discussions he has had with his counterparts in the EU, Africa and the middle east on dealing with the refugee crisis in Europe and the middle east. [905816]

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): We have these discussions regularly and our consistent focus is on securing a comprehensive and durable solution which tackles the causes as well as the consequences of migration.

Michael Tomlinson: Will the Minister reaffirm this Government’s commitment to Operation Sophia? Can he confirm that we will continue to co-operate with our European allies in relation to the refugee crisis?

Mr Lidington: I can confirm that. The Prime Minister said shortly after the referendum that we would continue our contribution to Sophia, which has already saved more than 16,400 lives and has destroyed more than 160 smuggling vessels.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister in close contact with the leading aid agencies—the International Rescue Committee, Save the Children and Médecins sans Frontières? They seem to have a different take from Governments on what is happening in camps and with movements. Is he keeping in touch with them?

Mr Lidington: My colleagues in the Department for International Development are in constant touch with the main aid agencies, and our very large humanitarian effort in Turkey, Syria itself and the neighbouring countries, Lebanon and Jordan, is very much focused through the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other such agencies.

25. [905832] Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): In view of the fact that the appalling hardships and loss of life arising from the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean are clearly long term and in danger of becoming institutionalised, will my right hon. Friend give consideration to the proposal from the International Chamber of Shipping, originally put forward last autumn, to establish a UN humanitarian zone covering the affected areas?

Mr Lidington: Although the International Chamber of Shipping proposal was indeed constructive, I do not want to underestimate the difficulties of getting agreement in the Security Council on anything through the UN. We have Operation Sophia, which is working and to which many European countries are actively contributing, and we should aim to make that work still more effective, help the Libyans build up the capacity of their own coastguard, and use the instruments available.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Does the Minister accept that in respect of the Brexit negotiations, much work will require to be done to secure joint EU-UK efforts in northern Africa on tackling the escalating refugee crisis?

Mr Lidington: So long as we remain members of the European Union and afterwards, it will remain in the interests of this country that we work very closely with our European friends and allies. This is a problem that will be with us for a generation and it will need concerted international co-operation.

Trade and Diplomatic Connections: UK/Commonwealth

10. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to promote trade and diplomatic connections between the UK and other Commonwealth countries. [905817]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): We have eight Commonwealth trade envoys representing British business interests in 10 Commonwealth states. We have expanded the British Government’s representation in a number of countries,
and we are looking forward to the inaugural Commonwealth Trade Ministers meeting in London in March next year, which will be co-hosted by ourselves and the Government of Malta.

**Martin Vickers:** With the decision to withdraw from the EU, many British companies will be looking to expand their business with Commonwealth countries. What specific plans do the Government have to support them in that respect?

**Mr Swire:** That is something we are concentrating on. Intra-Commonwealth trade is estimated at over $680 billion, and it is projected to surpass $1 trillion by 2020. The Commonwealth includes 53 member states, a quarter of the world’s land mass and 2.2 billion people, and 60% of the Commonwealth’s population is under the age of 30, so there are some huge and exciting opportunities there.

**Mr Swire:** I hope my hon. Friend is right. It is worth remembering that three quarters of UK-Commonwealth trade is with India, Australia, Canada, Singapore, South Africa and Malaysia, so we do need to expand that into some of the Commonwealth countries of Africa.

**Diplomatic/Economic Relations: Caspian and South Caucasus Region**

13. **Mr Steve Baker** (Wycombe) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to enhance diplomatic and economic relations with the Caspian and South Caucasus region.

**Mr Hammond:** The United Kingdom has strong bilateral relations with countries in the Caspian and South Caucasus region. It also has significant commercial interests there, particularly in the oil and gas sector.

**Mr Baker:** To defend Europe against excessive reliance on Russian energy supplies and to provide opportunities for small British energy firms — particularly those from Scotland — will my right hon. Friend continue to encourage and support BP in its work with the Government of Azerbaijan to deliver the trans-Turkish pipeline?

**Mr Liddington:** Indeed. That pipeline is in the economic and strategic interests of the United Kingdom. My hon. Friend also makes a strong point about Scotland: many Scottish companies are in Azerbaijan in the wake of BP’s investment, and that is another example of how the UK and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, through our embassies, are helping to deliver for the people of Scotland.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): I was in Tbilisi, in Georgia, last week with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. A number of people we spoke to were extremely concerned about the impact of the UK leaving the European Union on a lot of the diplomatic work that is going on to encourage countries such as Georgia to move towards western Europe. What assessment has the Foreign Secretary made of that issue, and what steps is he taking to persuade people in countries such as Georgia that their future lies in links with western Europe?

**Mr Liddington:** We were very active in the preparation for, and at, the NATO summit in Warsaw to emphasise that our commitment to working closely with countries such as Georgia to bring them into the Euro-Atlantic family of nations continues, and I think their Governments well understand that commitment.

**ISIS/Daesh**

14. **Dr Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the progress of the international campaign to defeat ISIS/Daesh.

**The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs** (Mr Philip Hammond): Significant military progress has been made in Iraq, Syria and Libya since my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary updated the House on 24 May. Iraqi security forces have liberated Falluja. The Syrian Democratic Forces are closing in on Manbij in Syria. In Libya, Misratan forces have pushed Daesh back to the city centre in Sirte, and the Libyan national army is winning the battle against Daesh in Benghazi. We now need to see political progress in Syria, Libya and Iraq to match those military successes.

**Dr Whitehead:** What initiatives has the Secretary of State undertaken recently to ensure that the international effort concentrates on securing the defeat of Daesh, rather than of the proxies, or the allies, involved in the process?

**Mr Hammond:** The hon. Gentleman is referring, I think, to the situation in Syria, where there are two separate battles going on: the civil war between the regime and its opponents, and the battle by the international community against Daesh. We are clear, and always have been clear, that there cannot be lasting success against Daesh unless we resolve the political crisis in Syria and create a regime that is acceptable to the Sunni Muslim population of Syria, giving them an alternative to the appalling offer from Daesh.

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Countering Daesh in Libya requires a stable Government and an end to the country’s ongoing civil war. On 19 April, the Secretary of State said that the new Government of National Accord is “the only legitimate Government of Libya.” — [Official Report, 19 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 781.]

Will he therefore assure the House that, since the GNA was formed last December, no British support has been provided to any Libyan militia group that is not allied to the GNA, such as those working with former general Khalifa Haftar?

**Mr Hammond:** The hon. Lady knows that if we were minded to commit combat forces to activity in Libya, we would first come to the House of Commons. We are
working very closely with the Government of National Accord, including talking to them about how we can use exemptions from the UN arms embargo to forge a closer working relationship between militias and that Government. She will be interested to know that later this afternoon I will meet Prime Minister Sarraj here in London.

Topical Questions

T1. [905798] Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): My priority is to ensure that we continue to address, head-on, Islamist extremism and the threats to the rules-based international system, while at the same time pivoting resources to respond to the major foreign policy challenge of implementing the UK’s decision to leave the EU and negotiating the terms of Britain’s future relationship with the EU 27.

Alex Chalk: Britain is a global trading nation. What steps have been taken to ensure that our embassies and high commissions around the world are in the best possible position to forge excellent trade deals for the United Kingdom?

Mr Hammond: As one of my colleagues said earlier, last week we had all our senior people in London for the annual leadership conference, and I clearly set out to them the challenge to the Foreign Office and its network as we move into this new phase where we will seek to redouble our efforts to build trade relationships around the world beyond the European Union. I can tell my hon. Friend, and the House, that I got the resounding response that they are up for that challenge.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Earlier today, the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague ruled against Chinese claims to territorial rights in the South China sea, backing a case brought by the Philippines. Does the Secretary of State agree that the PCA’s ruling must be respected, and that any non-compliance by the Chinese Government would not only cause severe reputational damage to China but constitute a serious breach of international law?

Mr Hammond: The UK’s position has always been, and will remain, that we urge respect for international law and the rules-based international system, and decisions arising from international tribunals. As the hon. Lady will know, the ruling is 501 pages long. It flopped on to my desk just before coming over here to answer questions— [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) is obviously super-efficient; I might test her later. We will study the decision carefully. If the hon. Lady can give me any insight into her understanding of page 432, I would be very grateful.

Mr Speaker: So would we all.

Mr Hammond: We take the threat of nuclear proliferation very seriously indeed. We have made huge progress over the past 18 months in shutting down the Iranian nuclear weapons programme. We remain deeply concerned about the programme in North Korea and about the risk of proliferation particularly from North Korea. We work very closely with allies and partners around the world to address that challenge.

T4. [905801] Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Given the upsurge in violence in South Sudan over the weekend, what action have Ministers taken on the situation there?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The hon. Gentleman is right to raise concerns about the growing conflict in South Sudan. The outbreak of fighting around Juba is very serious indeed. I attended a signing bringing the two sides together in South Sudan over a year ago, and there was a huge amount of optimism at that point. Unfortunately, that has dissipated, and there are now 2.4 million displaced people there. We are watching events very closely, and we urge the sides to come together to begin peace talks again.

T3. [905800] Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): After five decades of armed conflict in Colombia, where some 200,000 people have lost their lives and many millions have been displaced, a historic ceasefire has been agreed between the Colombian Government and FARC. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the peace process and Britain’s role within it?

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): Yes, of course. I welcome the bilateral ceasefire and disarmament agreement reached by the Colombian Government and FARC on 23 June. That is a significant step towards ending more than 50 years of conflict that have affected the lives of so many Colombians. We will continue to support Colombia during the implementation of the peace accord.

T5. [905802] Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary is probably aware that over the weekend the Indian security forces opened fire on a funeral procession in occupied Kashmir, killing more than 30 people, with the death toll expected to rise, 100 wounded and ambulances attacked. Will the Minister meet his counterpart in the Indian Government and inform them that opening fire on funeral processions or protestors is not correct and that the perpetrators should be brought to justice?

Mr Swire: I refer the hon. Lady to my earlier comments about the situation in Kashmir, which we are following very closely. Our high commissioner and the team are very much on the case. We regret all violence in that part of the world.

T8. [905805] Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): The situation in the Maldives continues to deteriorate. What steps have been taken to persuade its Government to change its current trajectory?

Mr Swire: We are extremely concerned. We strongly encourage the Government of the Maldives to engage constructively with both the United Nations and the Commonwealth envoys and to implement all of the
recent recommendations of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group. It is crucial that concrete progress is delivered by CMAG’s September meeting. We are also considering bilateral action, including exclusion orders against senior members of the Government and the judiciary.

T6. [905803] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Chagos islanders were the first victims of the UK’s nuclear policy, given that their eviction helped the UK get a discount on Polaris. Lords at the Supreme Court now advise that a refusal to permit resettlement may be “irrational, unreasonable or disproportionate”. Will the Secretary of State advise the new Prime Minister of those factors and ask her to make a quick decision on resettlement for the Chagos islanders?

Mr Philip Hammond: As the hon. Gentleman and the House will know, we have been studying options relating to the British Indian Ocean Territory and the situation of the Chagos islanders. The current Prime Minister has taken a great interest in the issue, but it is clear that it will now fall to the new Prime Minister to make a decision.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The people of Gibraltar feel particularly concerned about pressure from Spain now that we are leaving the European Union. Will the Minister for Europe confirm that their Government will be fully involved in the negotiations, and does he agree that their economy could be given an immediate boost, first, by a free trade agreement between Gibraltar and the UK, and, secondly, by ruling out any pressure from Spain now that we are leaving the European Union. Will the Minister for Europe confirm that their Government will be fully involved in the negotiations, and does he agree that their economy could be given an immediate boost, first, by a free trade agreement between Gibraltar and the UK, and, secondly, by ruling out any redundancies in the civilian, locally employed Ministry of Defence force?

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): My hon. Friend is a doughty champion of Gibraltar. I saw the Chief Minister, Fabian Picardo, yesterday; it was my third such conversation with him since the UK referendum. I have not only recommitted the British Government to the full involvement of Gibraltar in the negotiations for our exit from and subsequent relationship with the EU 27; I have also invited the Chief Minister to identify the key economic priorities for the people of Gibraltar as we approach those negotiations.

T7. [905804] Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): Judicial executions in Iran have more than doubled since 2010 and there have been 2,400 executions since President Rouhani was elected three years ago. What representations have the Government made to the Government of Iran over the execution of children, particularly those such as Fatemeh Salbehi and Jannat Mir, an Afghan boy who was hanged when he was just 14 or 15 years old?

Mr Philip Hammond: We regularly make representations to the Government of Iran about the widespread abuse of human rights there, including the widespread use of the death sentence and the completely unacceptable practice of imposing death sentences on minors. We will continue to make such representations at every opportunity.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Commonwealth countries are already large investors into the UK. Will the Government continue to work with Commonwealth business groups, such as the Confederation of Indian Industry, to make sure that that track record continues?

Mr Swire: Yes, we most certainly will, and we will certainly continue to work with the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council on promoting intra-Commonwealth trade.

T9. [905806] Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): May I thank the Foreign Secretary for hosting an event at the Foreign Office yesterday evening to commemorate the 21st anniversary of the massacre at Srebrenica? We all listened in silence to the tales told by survivors of the massacre. Will he join me in saying that it is important not only that we remember Srebrenica, but that we redouble our efforts to show future generations where hate and intolerance can lead?

Mr Philip Hammond: Yes, of course I will. Anyone who was there last night will have heard the moving testimony of people who survived the terrible events in Srebrenica 21 years ago and their harrowing tales of their experiences and the utterly needless and unjustified slaughter that occurred. The whole purpose of remembering Srebrenica is not just to remember, but to ensure that we apply the lessons and that it can never happen again.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): An important economic relationship that we have with India is the Tata Steel UK portfolio. Will the Secretary of State continue to make sure that its protection continues to be at the forefront of our diplomatic relationship with India so that we can continue to have a sustainable steel industry in this country?

Mr Hammond: I can tell my hon. Friend that this remains a high priority for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Claire Martin died in Italy four years ago due to stab wounds in the neck. Her death was recorded as suicide. Her parents are my constituents, and they need the full weight of the Foreign Office to help them. Support has been lukewarm and half-hearted so far. Will the Minister promise to step things up a gear and help this family?

Mr Liddington: I am happy to have a further conversation with the hon. Lady and her constituents about this tragic case. Of course, it remains the case that the United Kingdom cannot carry out investigations in the Italian judicial system, any more than the Italian Government can do so here. However, my understanding is that the magistrate has offered a meeting with the family, and I hope that that may provide a way forward.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): The anniversary of the Iran nuclear deal falls in two days. Will the Minister update the House on what discussions he is having with his US counterparts on banking sanctions to encourage more British businesses to invest in Iran?

Mr Philip Hammond: Those discussions continue. I promise that this is not a planted question—[Interruption.] Sorry, what is one of those? The hon. Lady will not know this but there is a meeting this afternoon at Lancaster House between the Iranian Central Bank, the United States Treasury and international banks based in London in an attempt to try to make some
progress on this matter so that the people of Iran can start to benefit from the seminal deal that was done a year ago.

Mr Speaker: It is a pleasure to welcome back to the House the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn, Tulip Siddiq.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. My constituent Nazanin has been detained in Iran for 100 days now, with no access to lawyers and minimal contact with her three-year-old daughter. Will the Minister join me in formally denouncing the actions of the Iranian authorities and make sure that Nazanin and Gabriella are returned to their home in West Hampstead as soon as possible?

Mr Hammond: We continue to lobby the Iranians regularly about all our consular cases in Iran, including that of Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I have raised the case a number of times, and, on 4 July, spoke to Foreign Minister Zarif. I subsequently followed that up with a letter. On 18 May, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), the Minister with responsibility for consular matters in Iran, met Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s family. We will continue to push the Iranians for consular access to her—the challenge is that Iran does not recognise dual nationality—and for more information about the charges that are alleged against her.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): From my recent NATO Parliamentary Assembly visit to Kiev, I know that there is palpable fear from the Ukrainians that sanctions may start to be lifted against Russia and President Putin. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that cannot happen until meaningful discussions have taken place on Ukraine’s sovereign borders?

Mr Hammond: I would go a little further: that cannot happen until Russia has complied with its obligations under the Minsk agreement. At the weekend, in Warsaw, I met the Ukrainian Foreign Minister. My hon. Friend is right that there is concern among Ukrainians that Britain’s departure from the European Union may lead to a weakening of European Union resolve on this issue. I very much hope that that will not be the case, but it is certainly true that we have been one of the leading advocates of a tough line within the European Union.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): In the light of the ongoing dreadful events in Sudan, many of us find questionable the context and the content of the UK-Sudan strategic dialogue. What red lines do the UK Government have in that dialogue?

Mr Ellwood: If I may, I will ask the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), the Minister with responsibility for Africa, to write to the hon. Member with more detail. However, I can say that the dialogue is an important juncture in our relationship, and we were invited by Sudan to commence it. Let me make it very clear that we need to continue to support Sudan. It is a source, host and transit country for migration. What is going on there affects the rest of Europe, and so we want to continue to help with the dire humanitarian situation there. The 2.5 million people long-term displaced people need our support.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): May I join those who are welcoming the fact that a large number of big players in the global economy are queuing up to do bilateral trade deals with the UK? My many Korean constituents would very much like to know whether that includes South Korea, which is a brilliant trade partner with the UK.

Mr Philip Hammond: Of course, the European Union has an existing free trade agreement with the Republic of Korea. Under that free trade agreement, the UK’s exports to Korea have more than doubled over a very short period of time. Once we are outside the European Union, depending on the details of the arrangements we make with the European Union, we will be ready to enter into new trade agreements with all countries around the world. The UK will remain an outward-facing trading nation, delivering our prosperity by our success around the globe.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): What recent discussions, if any, have the Government had with Turkey about its opposition to the Syrian Democratic Forces’ offensive to relieve Manbij, which is a very important strategic battle?

Mr Hammond: I met my Turkish opposite number and sat next to President Erdogan in the plenary session at the NATO summit in Warsaw at the weekend, and we discussed this issue. Of course, the SDF assault on the Manbij pocket is vital, and it will close a strategic gap and cut off supplies and routes for fighters into Syria in an important way. The Turks’ concern is the role of Kurdish organisations within the SDF, including some that are associated with proscribed organisations. The US is brokering a solution that seeks to reassure the Turks while reinforcing the SDF and their ability to deliver their objectives in Manbij.

Mr Speaker: We have run out of time, but my appetite for hearing my colleagues is almost insatiable. I call Kevin Foster.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. We recently marked the first anniversary of the dreadful terrorist massacre at Sousse in Tunisia. Can the Minister update me on the work that is being done by the Foreign Office to support the families of the victims and to mark that dreadful event?

Mr Ellwood: I had the honour of representing Britain at the ceremony that took place in Sousse to mark the anniversary of the tragic events there. We have done everything we can, from a Government perspective, working across Government to provide support to those who are bereaved, those who were seriously injured and those who have been affected by the mental trauma of what they saw. That help continues, and I am pleased to confirm the announcement that the Prime Minister made at the weekend that a memorial will be built—it is...
expected to be in the north of England—to mark the horrific events and to give the families a solemn location at which they can pay their respects.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Can the Foreign Secretary tell the House what progress has been made in persuading our allies to provide support for Yazidi women who have escaped from sexual slavery under Daesh and who are now in great need of medical and psychological support, which they cannot access properly in either Syria or Iraq?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to draw attention to those who are fleeing persecution by Daesh. We have had a number of debates on the matter, and it is not just the Yazidis; it is Christians and other minorities as well. We are using our Department for International Development funds to support the non-governmental organisations that directly target those people to provide that support in the immediate aftermath, but also in the long term.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I thought I had detected emissions of steam from Slough. That is a fate better avoided, I think. I call Fiona Mactaggart.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The reason I was steamy is that I spoke this morning to my constituent whose husband, Nawaz Khan, has been detained in South Sudan since 18 June without charge. It seems to me that in view of the situation and the turmoil there, it is urgent that the British authorities demand his release or charge instantly. This man is a diabetic, and he is not being properly looked after. It is time we defended our citizen.

Mr Ellwood: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this matter. We have already touched on the concerns that we have about South Sudan and the instability that we are seeing there, despite the transitional Government of national unity. The right hon. Lady has raised an important consular case, and I will ask the Minister with responsibility for Africa to get in touch with her to find out what consular support is being provided.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry that I cannot accommodate all colleagues, but I will take Joanna Cherry.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Can the Minister tell the House whether following Brexit the United Kingdom will continue to participate in the Paris climate change agreement, or whether that agreement will need to be rewritten?

Mr Ellwood: This is a prime example of where we need to calm down and not scaremonger. We are absolutely committed to COP 22 on climate change, and to the target of reducing our emissions by 2050.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I will call the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) who I think wishes to raise a constituency matter, but that really will be the last question.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I am grateful, Mr Speaker. The Minister will recall the case of my constituent, Deborah Pearson, and her niece Julie Pearson who was killed in Israel last year. Her family are constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh). We now have the autopsy report, but it is in Hebrew and it has been suggested that the FCO might assume the cost of translating it. Will the FCO support that? I am grateful for the Minister’s support so far, but the family are desperate and need more support. Will he consider further help?

Mr Ellwood: This has been a difficult case for the family and for everybody involved. I have met a number of hon. Members who have been involved, and I also raised the issue with the Israeli authorities. It is not normal for the Foreign Office to provide translation facilities. Perhaps we could discuss the matter outside the Chamber and work to provide assistance to the family.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I know we have overrun, but Foreign Office questions tend to break box office records and Ministers should take some pride in that fact—the other way of looking at it is that I am giving them additional speaking opportunities.
Points of Order

12.41 pm

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Reports have come in that my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), who is standing for the leadership of my party, has had her constituency windows broken, and the police have confirmed that such an incident has taken place. Can we take this opportunity to deplore such hooliganism and thuggery, whoever commits it and whichever party is involved? It is totally unacceptable, and one hopes that the police will apprehend the culprit as quickly as possible.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. It is not strictly in any procedural sense a matter for the Chair, but it is in one respect because, in common with all colleagues, the Chair believes in democracy and the peaceful exchange of opinion. We are a pluralist society, and if people think that they will get their way through violence, threats and intimidation, they will soon find themselves wrong. If I may say so, no one is more suited to making that point than someone who has served as a democratic parliamentarian for as long as the hon. Gentleman.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Unfortunately, for all sorts of reasons, I was not able to be here for business questions last Thursday, so later I had to read Hansard, which I scoured for announcements regarding next week’s business, particularly for next Monday. On Saturday, I gather that the Prime Minister announced—not to the House or even in this country, but in Poland—that next Monday we will be debating the renewal of Trident. On Sunday, I gather that the Prime Minister announced—not to the House or even in this country, but in Poland—that next Monday we will be debating the renewal of Trident. I make no judgment about how people should vote on that, but why has the House still not been formally told that that will be our business next week? Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Defence had the perfect opportunity to make that clear to the House, had he wanted to. On today’s Order Paper, a motion tabled by the Leader of the House states:

“That, at the sitting on Monday 18 July, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to the UK’s nuclear deterrent not later than 10.00pm”.

That is a kind of sub-announcement that we will debate the issue next Monday, but we have still had no sign of what the motion will be, whether it will be amendable, and under what terms that debate will be held. Surely it would be more courteous to the House to have a proper supplementary business statement that lays out next Monday’s business.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He has the advantage of being right on both counts.

Chris Bryant: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am in a benign and generous mood, so I will allow a further point of order from the hon. Member for Rhondda.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The Ministry of Defence released a press release—this is therefore not just a glancing reference by the Secretary of State—stating that there would be a motion, but the House has certainly not been informed. Indeed, the motion is about not renewal, but the principle of continuous at-sea nuclear deterrence, which in my view seems to be a different issue.

Mr Speaker: Well, I confess I do not know what press offices get up to in these matters, but suffice it to say that ultimately the Secretary of State in a Department is always everywhere and for everything responsible in that Department. We probably should not dwell on this further, but let us try to learn from it for the future.

Chris Bryant: I am grateful, Mr Speaker. The point, surely, is that, as things stand, unless the Leader of the House gives a clear statement to the House, Thursday morning will be the first time we will know for certain what next Monday’s business will be, by which time it will be impossible for us to table amendments to the motion that will be taken on Monday, unless you are going to be very generous about the tabling of manuscript amendments and so on. Surely, when we are considering the defence of our nation, it is ludicrous for the Government to indulge in such shenanigans?

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman is twofold. First, it would be better if there were a supplementary business statement. I would have thought that the terms in which I have answered him make that so clear that the point needs simply to waft from the scholarly cranium of the junior Whip on duty to the powers that be in the relevant Government Department.
Secondly, in the absence of any such supplementary business statement, which I really would regard as a considerable discourtesy to the House, the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members can be assured that it will be possible to table amendments on Thursday. I have not thought about the precise chronology of events, but if it is necessary for me to allow manuscript amendments, because of circumstances not of the hon. Gentleman’s devising, they certainly will be allowed, subject only to those amendments, in terms of content, being orderly. I think the Whip has got the message.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hope it is a point of order and not the sort of thing that the hon. Gentleman used to chunter when he was heckling me 30 years ago at the University of Essex student union.

Ian Austin: Whether or not it is a point of order is for you to judge, Mr Speaker. On a happier note, I would like to thank you and the Officers of the House for enabling us to display in the Jubilee Room today a range of products manufactured in the black country, which as you know, Mr Speaker, is the greatest place in the world. If you have five minutes in your busy schedule to visit the Jubilee Room, you will see parts manufactured for Bugatti, Lamborghini and Ferrari, and the Olympic torch, which was also made in the black country. If that is not enough of an attraction, there is also some beer that was brewed in Dudley North. All Members are very welcome.

Mr Winnick: It is nice to agree with my hon. Friend for once.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman must speak for himself.

I very much appreciate what the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) has just said. If it is possible for me to pop in, I will try to do so, although I am not sure what the hours of this event are.

Ian Austin: From now until 4 o’clock.

Mr Speaker: I will do what I can, and I encourage other Members to do likewise.

We come now to the ten-minute rule motion, for which the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) has been so patiently waiting.

EU Citizens Resident in the United Kingdom (Right to Stay)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.50 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a bill to grant EU citizens the right to stay resident in the UK following the UK’s withdrawal from membership of the European Union; and for connected purposes.

On 24 June, 3 million EU citizens in the UK and 1.3 million British citizens in the EU woke up to an uncertain future because while the Brexiteers had pithy slogans aplenty, our Government had no plan for the long-term future of EU citizens in the UK or the UK post-Brexit. EU citizens were unable to vote in the referendum and were therefore left without a voice during the campaign. They now find themselves without the protection of their EU citizenship rights in the UK. EU citizenship includes not just the right to live, work and study in the UK but, for example, the right to participate in local, regional and European elections.

The current Prime Minister gave an assurance that there would be no immediate change, but this now carries little weight, given that we will have a new Prime Minister tomorrow. His assurances are therefore time-limited and have an imminent sell-by date. He has offered no protection for the rights of EU citizens and Brits abroad in the future. By calling and then losing the referendum, the current Prime Minister pulled the rug out from under the feet of these citizens. He needs to get that rug out of the removals van that is parked outside No. 10 and put it back before he departs. EU citizens need certainty about their long-term future in the UK, and they need this assurance now, before their futures are used as bargaining chips in our negotiations with the EU.

The Prime Minister has just appointed a new EU commissioner to replace Jonathan Hill, rather than leaving that to his successor. He should also act now while he still has time to secure the rights of EU citizens by unconditionally granting the right to stay to all EU citizens who were resident in the UK on 23 June. He can never make full amends for triggering a chain of events that will lead to economic and diplomatic disaster for the UK, but this would help to restore a modicum of credibility in the dying day of his premiership. If he fails to do so, there are three ways in which EU citizens’ rights could be safeguarded in the future.

First, a legal challenge might rely on an appeal under article 70.1(b) of the Vienna convention on the law of treaties. However, as Professor Douglas-Scott pointed out in an article for the UK Constitutional Law Association entitled “What Happens to ‘Acquired Rights’ in the Event of a Brexit?”, there is no consensus among lawyers about the application of the convention to EU citizens living in the UK. Neither does there seem to be much scope for protecting the position of EU citizens in the UK or Brits abroad through customary international law. EU citizens might have to wait years before any rights that they might have under the convention could be tested in court.
Secondly, the Government could negotiate an agreement with EU member states to allow the right to remain on a reciprocal basis for EU citizens living in the UK and British citizens living in the EU. The problem with that approach is that it turns EU citizens into bargaining chips. Such a negotiation does not yet have a start date, and the House has already condemned it, by 245 votes to two, as wrong in principle. To barter over the future of EU citizens and Britons in the EU would be to treat EU citizens as if they were children in a divorce settlement. That would be humiliating to the individuals concerned and their families, and it would demonstrate a shameful lack of political judgment on the part of the British Government. It would also be a very weak negotiating strategy, because there is a good chance that EU member states are likely to act unilaterally to guarantee the rights of British citizens.

Unless a future UK Government intended to hold EU citizens hostage in order to achieve concessions in other areas of the negotiations, such as access to the single market, there would be nothing else to negotiate. In his evidence to the Home Affairs Committee this afternoon, I am sure that the Immigration Minister will be pressed further on this issue. There were signs over the weekend, given comments by the Foreign Secretary at the NATO summit and reports on Saturday, that the Government’s position might be softening.

The third approach, which is that proposed by my Bill, would be for the Government to legislate now to secure the rights of EU citizens unilaterally, thereby providing desperately needed certainty for all EU nationals living here. We must make EU citizens feel welcome and safe in Britain. This reassurance would also help the 1.3 million British people living in the EU, help to secure the future of the 9% of NHS doctors who work in the UK and are from the EU, and help to ensure that Britain remains open and welcoming.

Yesterday, I met the campaign organisation New Europeans, which is a voice for EU citizens in the UK, and other charities and non-governmental organisations representing migrant communities. New Europeans has gathered more than 2,000 signatures on a letter to the Prime Minister asking for the issue to be resolved now. I also draw the House’s attention to early-day motion 259 on the status of British citizens resident in the EU and EU citizens resident in the UK, which makes the same call.

As I have mentioned, following a debate on a Labour motion, the House showed by a clear majority of 245 votes to two that it favoured sorting out the situation of EU citizens living in the UK immediately. Thanks to New Europeans, in the next few days I will also be meeting the EU Commission in the UK and ambassadors to EU member states in London to discuss the issue.

It is quite clear that many EU citizens no longer feel welcome in Britain and that many are leaving. I met someone earlier this morning who said exactly that: he and his partner feel that the only thing to do is to leave the UK, and they will be doing so shortly, even though they have lived here for more than 20 years and paid significant tax during that time. They no longer feel welcome. Numbers of race hate crimes and xenophobic attacks have increased since the referendum. In London alone, where more than 800,000 EU nationals live, there have been three race hate crimes every hour. These threats and acts of discrimination will continue unless and until the Government make it clear that they will ring-fence the rights of EU citizens who were living in the UK before 24 June. Providing such clarity is the purpose of the Bill, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Tom Brake, Tim Farron, Caroline Lucas, Mark Durkan, Dr Philippa Whitford, Kevin Barron, Mr Mark Williams, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Mr Nick Clegg, Norman Lamb and Greg Mulholland present the Bill.

Tom Brake accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 21 October, and to be printed (Bill 50).
Opposition Day

EU Referendum: Energy and Environment

12.58 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House recognises the uncertainty created by the result of the EU referendum for the protections currently in place for the UK's energy security, climate change commitments and the natural environment; notes that the discussion leading up to the EU referendum made little mention of environmental protection or climate change and considers that regulations and ambitions in those areas should in no way be diminished as a result of the outcome of that referendum; has serious concerns about the signals being sent to investors in those sectors by continued uncertainty; and therefore urges the Government to identify and fill any legislative gaps in environmental protection that may arise from the removal of EU law.

The motion stands in my name and those of other right hon. and hon. Members in the shadow Cabinet.

Before the referendum vote, the Government were already facing major problems securing the energy needs, emissions targets and environmental protections that the UK requires for the 21st century. These problems were mainly self-inflicted: an energy policy that left companies and investors confused, with feed-in tariffs for solar changed retrospectively; a moratorium on onshore wind power, despite its being the cheapest form of renewable energy; the subsidy for offshore wind cut; and the Government failing to indicate what would happen to the levy control framework beyond the cliff edge of 2020.

Investors were told that the Government were simultaneously incentivising new unconventional gas and phasing out unabated coal by 2025, yet the £1 billion still remaining for the development of carbon capture and storage was cut just four weeks before the final bids were to be made, with the consequent announcement by Drax of the abandonment of the White Rose CCS project and the announcement by Shell that it no longer saw a future in the near term for the Peterhead project. The Secretary of State's energy reset speech last November ended up leaving us the equivalent of 54 million tonnes of CO₂ further from achieving the fourth carbon budget.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): For many of the companies involved, the investment lead-in times are quite long, resulting in a very uncertain environment in which to work. That is leading to some of them pulling out of the UK altogether.

Barry Gardiner: I must, reluctantly, agree with my hon. Friend. This is not good news; it is really bad news for all of us. The investment climate in the UK is in a really dire state. In fact, the UK has now fallen from eighth to 11th to 13th in the Ernst & Young index of the best countries for investment in low-carbon technology, when we have previously never been outside the top 10. These are really worrying matters.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I recently asked the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what action she was going to take to promote zero-carbon homes, given that the Government had announced last July that they were going to scrap the target set by the previous Labour Government for all homes to be carbon-neutral by this year. She replied that she could reassure me that an EU directive was due to come into force in 2020 and that she believed near-zero carbon emissions would help to reduce bills. Given that we are leaving the EU, does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should take immediate action to reintroduce ambitious targets for zero-carbon homes?

Barry Gardiner: What an excellent point my hon. Friend makes. She knows, as I do, that the Secretary of State was someone who saw the value in the UK’s staying in the European Union and in all the directives and regulations that came from Europe, which afforded the sort of environmental protections and energy policies that would secure our future. No doubt the Secretary of State will respond responsibly to today’s brief, but I think she will feel a great deal of sympathy both with the remarks that my hon. Friend has just made and indeed my own remarks from the Dispatch Box.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case about the lack of investment and about economic instability. Does he agree with me that now is a good time for the Government to reverse their decision to privatise the Green Investment Bank, and that when they negotiate withdrawal the Government should make a strong case to remain in the European Investment Bank? If those two things do not happen, we will be in really difficult times.

Barry Gardiner: The hon. Lady, whom I regard as an hon. Friend, particularly on these matters, speaks with great knowledge. She is absolutely right about the Green Investment Bank, which was set up for a particular purpose: the Government recognised that there was a market failure. It was quite right of the Government to put the Green Investment Bank in place, but unfortunately the borrowing powers did not come quickly enough, and I think it is a huge mistake now to privatise the bank. It is a matter of deep regret to all who work in this environment. As for the hon. Lady’s remarks about the European Investment Bank, I shall come on to that subject later in my speech.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): On the subject of insecurity in investment, National Grid has said that fuel prices are about to rise as a result of the Brexit result. My “Prepay Rip Off” campaign showed that consumers were being overcharged to the tune of £1.7 billion a year. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that the Government outline what they are going to do to ensure that consumers are not ripped off further by having to pay more for their fuel?

Barry Gardiner: My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour has run a superb campaign on fuel poverty. She makes reference to the £1.7 billion that the Competition and Markets Authority report showed UK bill payers were being overcharged—overcharged by quite obscene amounts. It is, of course, right for the Government to come up with clear proposals about how to tackle that abuse, without just saying, as they have to date, that people need to be enabled to switch more easily.

Mr Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): This is one of the first of our debates to mention the result of the EU referendum. I know that the hon. Gentleman was on the other side of the argument, so it would be useful if
he told us whether, when it comes to a vote, he will vote to leave the EU despite his heavy heart or will he vote against the wishes of the British people?

**Barry Gardiner:** I always try to look at the motion in front of me on the Order Paper and make a judgment on it when I see what it says. I have done so for the past 19 and a half years, and I suspect I shall probably do it for the next few years as well.

Even the Government-dominated Select Committee has warned that what it calls the “hiatus” in project developments could threaten the UK’s ability to meet its energy and climate security targets, so when the Department’s own figures show the need for £100 billion of investment by 2020 to make our electricity infrastructure fit for purpose, the Secretary of State really does have to explain where she believes that investment is going to come from, given that investor confidence in her Department is at an all-time low.

Before the Secretary of State does so, however, perhaps she will confirm whether she instructed her Department not to prepare in any way for a leave vote, as the Prime Minister apparently directed. If that is so, can she explain why, because that is what business leaders out there are asking? It seems incomprehensible to them that the Prime Minister took such a gigantic risk with their future—a risk that will increase their cost of capital and the cost of energy to bill payers, both corporate and domestic alike—yet made absolutely no preparations for what might happen when that risk went wrong.

The IIGCC—Institutional Investors Group on Climate Change—a group of institutional investors representing over €13 trillion in assets, said in the aftermath of the vote to leave that it had brought “considerable uncertainty and market turmoil.” That only goes to prove that the art of litotes is not yet dead!

**Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op):** In the light of that dramatic uncertainty, does my hon. Friend agree that one thing the Government should do is to give a cast-iron guarantee that they will honour, post-Brexit, the environmental standards and undertakings that we have made in the EU to date?

**Barry Gardiner:** My hon. Friend, who takes a consistent and committed interest in these matters, is absolutely correct, and the precise intention of this motion is to flush out those issues and ensure that the Government do precisely as he says.

In the aftermath of the leave vote, the Government’s own external adviser has stated that a future for the Hinkley C nuclear power station is now “extremely unlikely”. Vattenfall has said it is now reassessing the risk of working in the UK, which could jeopardise its plans for a £5.5 billion wind farm off the east coast of England, while Siemens has announced that it is putting a freeze on its future—not its current—clean energy investments in Hull as a result of what it called the “increased uncertainty” from the leave vote.

I must say that for all the talk from the Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), about the “sunlit uplands” of the post-Brexit world, there is really no use in the Secretary of State trying to pretend that she thinks the vote is anything but a disaster when she herself is on record quoting the analysis of Vivid Economics warning that the result of an exclusion from the EU’s internal energy market could cost the UK up to £500 million a year by the early 2020s. The stock response of the right hon. Lady that Labour Members should not “talk Britain down” will simply not serve, given that these quotations come from her own advisers, industry leaders and, indeed, her!

Bloomberg New Energy Finance was not scaremongering when it said of the upcoming Brexit negotiations that they were “likely to cause project investors and banks to hesitate about committing new capital, and could cause a drop in renewable energy asset values”.

That was an authoritative, independent commentator telling the unvarnished truth.

**Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con):** I always follow the hon. Gentleman’s comments with a great deal of interest, but is it not about time that he and his party moved on? The British people have delivered their verdict. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that it is not terribly helpful of people like him to continue to talk the British economy down in that way?

**Barry Gardiner:** I understand that there is a need to move on, and the hon. Gentleman is right to say that we must now look to the future, but I think that if he bears with me, he will find that that is what I am trying to do. Yes, I am critical of where we are, but the criticisms that I have adumbrated so far are not my own. They are criticisms made by the Government’s own advisers, they are criticisms made by industry itself, and, indeed, they are criticisms made by the Secretary of State. I am not talking the UK economy down; I am trying to set out the present situation with clarity, and then see whether we can move on from it.

Perhaps the Secretary of State could do the same as Bloomberg in telling the unvarnished truth, and inform the House what assessment her Department has made of the increased price of imported energy as a result of the falling pound. I will happily give way to her if she wishes to do so.

**The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd) indicated dissent.**

**Barry Gardiner:** Perhaps, then, the Secretary of State could tell us what assessment her Department has made of the price premiums on loans that will be demanded by investors in energy infrastructure to cover the cost of political uncertainty. Is it 1%? Is it 2%? Again, I will happily give way to the Secretary of State if she wishes to inform the House what assessment her Department has made of those matters. No? In that case, I will give way to the spokesman for the Scottish National party.

**Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP):** Will the hon. Gentleman take the Secretary of State to task on what she intends to do to achieve the climate change targets in respect of completely decarbonising the transport and heating sectors in order to achieve 2050 targets?
Barry Gardiner: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is clear from what the Committee on Climate Change has said that the area in which the United Kingdom is falling behind most badly is not the power sector, but the transport and heating sectors. Of course, dealing with that does not rest solely with the Secretary of State; it also rests with her colleagues in the Department for Transport and the Department for Communities and Local Government.

Perhaps the Secretary of State would find it easier to explain how the UK might continue to benefit from the EU internal energy market—or does Brexit mean Brexit in this regard as well? We really do need clear answers to all these questions. Perhaps the right hon. Lady can tell us what will happen to the four clean energy projects that are currently being assessed by the European Fund for Strategic Investments. She knows that the European Investment Bank has been the UK’s biggest clean-energy lender, having put €31 billion into clean energy over the last five years. Has she identified a replacement source of funds for such projects?

Perhaps the Secretary of State can explain why, last week, the Government pulled their funding for the only large new gas plant that had managed to secure finance under the capacity market scheme after Carlton Power was unable to secure the investment that was needed for the Trafford plant. The capacity market has resoundingly failed to secure the new gas build that it was introduced to incentivise.

Perhaps the right hon. Lady can explain—after the failure of the green deal, and after acknowledging that neither the warm home scheme nor the energy company obligation is sufficiently well targeted to reach those most in need—precisely how she proposes to address energy efficiency and tackle the fuel poverty experienced by 2.38 million of our fellow citizens. Let me correct that, Mr Speaker: 1 should have said 2.38 million households, in England alone. Perhaps the right hon. Lady might also explain why National Grid warned on Friday that the lights were kept on only by emergency measures last year. The fact is that the Government’s energy policy has pushed us further towards energy insecurity.

Our purpose in securing this Opposition Day debate is precisely to ensure that the Government cannot ignore such pressing concerns following the referendum. The vote to leave was not a vote for blackouts and soaring energy bills; it is the Government’s responsibility to ensure that those things do not happen.

The Committee on Climate Change, which has a statutory duty to advise the Government on the most cost-effective route to decarbonisation, has always made it clear that early action is cheaper action. As its chief executive warned us last week, leaving the EU calls the mechanism of how we reach our targets into question. The Government’s policy failure has created a 10% gap in emissions projections towards our legally binding climate target for the mid-2020s, and they are nearly 50% short of meeting their intended target for 2030—that is, if the Secretary of State ever gets round to actually complying with her statutory obligation to set the target. I believe that that is now due to happen on Monday, which would make it only 18 days beyond the legal statutory limit.

Last year, the Environmental Audit Committee gave the Government a red card for their record on managing future climate change risks. The chair of the Infrastructure Operators Adaptation Forum concluded: “we simply do not know the capability of the vast majority of stuff out there for current weather, never mind the future”.

The National Security Risk Assessment cites flood risk to the UK as a tier 1 priority risk, alongside terrorism and cyber-attacks, and, of course, it is our most deprived communities that face the greatest increases in flood risk. However, new evidence released today by the Committee on Climate Change renders starker than ever the threat to British households and businesses from a failure to manage climate change. Its published estimates show that, without increased Government action on climate adaptation, the number of homes at high risk from flooding will rise to well over 1 million even if we meet our current climate targets.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): I apologise for intervening so early, Mr Speaker. Will the hon. Gentleman please explain the precise relationship between the European Union issue and the questions that he is raising about flooding?

Mr Speaker: The Minister is not intervening that early, although some people might think that the hon. Gentleman was approaching the conclusion of his preliminary remarks.

Barry Gardiner: I am sure you are correct, Mr Speaker, in referring to “his preliminary remarks”.

I am happy to explain that relationship. Unless we have clarity about the post-Brexit scenario, unless we know where we will be able to secure funds to replace all the funds that fell within the common agricultural policy to finance measures to mitigate flooding, and unless we are able to deal with land management in the way that was allowed by the European Union, we will not have clarity on these matters, and clarity is vital to adaptation.

We are living at a time of increased risk, and robust planning is required to limit harmful impacts on British communities and businesses. I say in all seriousness that, following the devastation of communities and cities around our country by recent floods, this new assessment requires a new response from the Government. Cuts in the budgets, and in the staffing capacity of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Environment Agency, have left the UK increasingly vulnerable, and the Government must take responsibility for that.

The UK’s ability to face up to energy and environmental challenges—more than almost any other area of policy—was strengthened by our EU membership. Given that the Treasury’s principal response to the leave vote so far is a U-turn on the Chancellor’s core election pledge to balance the books by 2020—

Dr Murrison: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Barry Gardiner: I think you would like me to press on, Mr Speaker, so I will not. I have, I think, been most generous in giving way.
Given the Treasury’s response, it would be helpful to hear from the Under-Secretary, when he winds up the debate, precisely where he proposes to find the additional resources that are required for adequate flood defences to meet the new assessment. Last week, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs told the House:

“It is absolutely clear that it is business as usual while we remain members of the EU.”—[Official Report, 7 July 2016; Vol. 62, c. 1030.] Perhaps she will understand that what concerns many of us is that, as soon as we are no longer members of the EU, many of the protections the UK natural environment currently enjoys will fall away. The clean air directive has been strenuously opposed in Europe by this Government, who tried to water it down for years; indeed our own Supreme Court has now found them to be in breach. I pay tribute to ClientEarth and its work in holding Government to account for the 52,500 excess deaths every year as a result of polluted air in the UK, and I pay particular tribute to Sadiq Khan as Mayor of London who used the 60th anniversary of the Clean Air Act 1956 to unveil a new clean air programme.

The Government must remember that they have a job to do, and that includes taking concrete action to meet the legal air quality standards as ordered by the UK’s Supreme Court. The Government need to explain to the House if they will incorporate the provisions of the clean air directive into UK law and then begin to comply with its provisions in a way that they have, tragically, failed to do for the past six years.

The birds and habitat directives may well already be fully transposed into UK law, but we need to know if our beaches will still be protected from sewage by the bathing water directive or whether swimming through sewage will once again become a feature of a day at the seaside. We need to know which elements of the waste and electronic equipment directive were not transposed into UK law under the 2013 regulations and what the impact of leaving the EU might be for our recycling industries and our commitment to the circular economy.

Dr Murrison: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Barry Gardiner: No, I will not.

The fact is that fish and birds and insects do not carry passports; pollution is oblivious to the strictures of national airspace or inshore waters. If we wish to manage all of these, whether as pests, problems or resources, then it is better to do so in concert with our regional neighbours. The vote to leave the EU has made that harder. The Government must outline how they propose to overcome that problem.

The Environment Secretary told the House last week that the subject of continued subsidies to farmers up to 2020 “is not a decision I can make at this stage.”—[Official Report, 7 July 2016; Vol. 612, c. 1028.]

Surely it is a decision that should have been made long before anyone asked farmers to vote to leave the EU. Much of the subsidy that farmers receive is for environmental stewardship schemes and other land management practices that benefit biodiversity and wildlife. To turn round to farmers now and say that the £3.5 billion total of subsidy that used to flow each year from the EU into their pockets is no longer secure is not just an attack on farmers’ livelihoods; it is an attack on all the work that farmers do to enhance our environment and protect our landscapes.

These are not abstract challenges. Managing the risks born of the uncertainty from the referendum outcome is a responsibility for Government. Ministers must urgently identify any legislative gaps in environmental protection that may arise from the removal of EU law, and develop plans to replace any protections so that the UK does not become a riskier, unhealthier or more polluted place to live in or do business in.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I note the hon. Gentleman’s comments on the CAP, but he would be hard-pressed to find any conservation or environment group in the country that believes it provides a net benefit to the environment. There are bits that are good for the environment, but overall I do not think anyone would defend it as a net good for the environment. Surely Brexit gives us an opportunity to take those funds and tailor them in such a way that they genuinely are used to subsidise farmers in delivering a genuine public good? This is a massive opportunity.

Barry Gardiner: I am happy to say to the hon. Gentleman that I have been a critic of the CAP, as he has, for many years, but the pillar 2 arrangements under the CAP and the environmental stewardship arrangements under the CAP were positive and there was a net benefit from those. I want the Government to set out the new arrangements they propose, so that we can be sure that the environmental protections remain in place, and that that money is not frittered away on something else.

The Government must provide answers to Parliament and the public, who want to be reassured that our environmental protections are not to be weakened in some Brexit bonfire of the regulations. The environmental protections we have enjoyed under the EU are not bureaucracy to be done away with; they are part of what it is to live in a civilised country that respects the natural world and believes that the only prosperous future is a sustainable one.

So, finally, I ask three key questions. Will the Government now move swiftly to ratify the Paris climate agreement? How will the Government press for access to the internal energy market? How will the Government ensure that energy bills do not go up as a result of the increased investor uncertainty following the vote?

Ultimately, the Government must commit to safeguarding environmental protections to at least the same level we have enjoyed within the EU, by passing into UK law all those regulations that would otherwise fall away upon leaving the EU.

1.25 pm

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): I thank the Opposition and the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) for giving the Government the opportunity to address some of these important questions which I know are high in people’s minds, particularly among stakeholders. I also want to respond to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison): it may have escaped some people’s notice, but I did campaign
on the other side of the EU referendum. I do agree with him, however, that we must move on: Brexit means Brexit and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said, we will make a success of it.

It is true that the decision the country made on 23 June is of historic importance and it is true that the key challenge facing us now is to work towards a settlement that is in the best interests of Britain. But it is not true that, as the hon. Member for Brent North has been suggesting, our commitment to protect the environment, tackle climate change and provide homes and businesses across the country with secure and clean energy has faltered in any way. Our commitment to these tasks has not changed and will not change.

I have made it my priority to reiterate these points over the past fortnight. I have said that security of supply would be our first priority, and it remains so. My Department announced last week how much electricity capacity we intend to buy in the forthcoming capacity market auctions. This commitment is the backbone of our energy policy. I announced that the Government would accept the Committee on Climate Change’s recommendation for the level of the fifth carbon budget, a long-term commitment taking us way beyond this Parliament to 2032. I have also made it clear that we remain committed to holding a competitive contracts for difference allocation round later this year.

While much remains the same, there is no point pretending that the vote to leave the EU is not of huge significance. There are risks for us to overcome, but this Government will continue to do our part to deliver on the energy and environmental challenges our country faces.

Geraint Davies: Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government intend to honour their commitments to the environment as set out in EU directives in the past, so that standards do not slip from the current standards, whether on air quality, flooding or climate change, and does she agree that there should be legislation to say that these should become minimum standards?

Amber Rudd: What I can say is that this Government’s commitment to a clean environment and our climate change commitments remains unchanged. I will address in my remarks climate change and energy issues, and I will allow the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), to address the environmental ones in his remarks, no doubt dealing with the exact points that have been raised.

Dr Murrison: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is a pity that Opposition Members seem to be suggesting that the EU has dragged the UK from darkness into enlightenment? Does she also agree that Britain has traditionally led the way in environmental legislation? I would cite particularly the Clean Air Act 1956, which the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) cited without a hint of irony.

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend and, as he rightly said earlier, we must move on. There are benefits to what we have already proposed and there have been benefits from the EU directives as well. They have raised standards in some areas, and I believe we will now maintain them and not allow them to slip at all.

Caroline Lucas: We were speaking earlier about investment and how, unfortunately, investors are getting increasingly cautious. Will the Secretary of State do all she can to persuade her colleagues that we must remain part of the European Investment Bank, at least as long as the negotiations are going on, because if we withdraw right now there will be another huge amount of potential investment not coming into this country when we need it most?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for her question; I was going to talk about investment anyway. She is absolutely right to mention the importance of investment in securing our clean energy. Like her, I appreciate the impact that the European Investment Bank has had on supporting clean energy in this country and I would hope that our membership of it will continue. I cannot give her any commitments, however. I shall wait to see how this emerges as part of the negotiations, but I share her view on how important it is.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I commend the Secretary of State’s decision, in the midst of the post-Brexit turmoil, to publish the fifth carbon budget. I congratulate her on that. The Environmental Audit Committee has heard this morning from the National Audit Office that a 10% achievement gap has already opened up in the fourth carbon budget between 2023 and 2027. Will she acknowledge that the Treasury’s decision in the last spending review to cancel the carbon capture and storage competition will do little to encourage investor confidence in that area?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady is right: we have always known that we had an issue with the fourth carbon budget, and there is more work to be done. That is why it was a reasonable achievement to get cross-Government approval for the fifth carbon budget, and I thank her for her comment on that. There is still a lot of work to be done. There are policies to be decided on, and we will bring forward the emissions proposals by the end of this year in order to address those policies that are going to be needed in the 2020s.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): In a former life, I was the rapporteur in the European Parliament for the European Investment Bank. We are not only a stakeholder in the bank; we are a shareholder and one of its biggest funders. It funds projects across the planet, not just within the European Union. Surely there is no risk to investment in the United Kingdom while those factors remain the same.

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for clarifying that position, which will no doubt give the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) as much comfort as it has given me.

I want to make some more comments on investor confidence, which is central to this afternoon’s debate. Since the referendum, I have met investors from across the energy spectrum: nuclear, renewables, energy efficiency—all areas in which we need investment. Yesterday, I spoke to members of the managing board of Siemens
to reassure them of the commitments that I am setting out here today. Officials across my Department have regularly kept in contact with investors and energy companies to reiterate that message.

The message from business is clear. It still sees the UK as a great place to invest in. Britain remains one of the best places in the world in which to live and to do business. We have the rule of law, low taxes, a strong finance sector and a talented, creative and determined workforce. We have to build on those strengths, not turn away from them. Those factors combine with a clear energy policy framework and a strong investment-friendly economy to make the UK an ideal place to attract much-needed energy investment. The UK has been the fourth highest investor in clean energy globally for the past five years. This is investment in the energy infrastructure that we need to underpin a strong competitive economy, and this Government will do all we can to ensure that the UK remains an attractive place for investment. Whatever settlement we decide on in the coming months, those fundamentals will remain unchanged.

I want to underline our commitment to addressing climate change. Climate change has not been downgraded as a threat. It remains one of the most serious long-term risks to our economic and national security. I attended the world-class team of British diplomats at last year’s Paris climate talks. Our efforts were central to delivering that historic deal, and the UK will not step back from that international leadership. We must not turn our back on Europe or the world. Our relationships with the United States, China, India and Japan and with other European countries will stand us in strong stead as we deliver on the promises made in Paris. At the heart of that commitment is our own Climate Change Act 2008. The Act was not imposed on us by the EU; it was entirely home grown. It was also a world first and a prime example of the UK setting the agenda that others are now following. And let us not forget that it was delivered with unanimous support from right across the House.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): The Secretary of the State will be aware that the fifth carbon budget means that the UK is reducing carbon at a faster rate than any country in the EU and significantly faster than the EU’s intended nationally determined contribution put forward in Paris. Is the risk of Brexit not that we might go back on our climate change objectives, but that we will not bring the rest of Europe with us, given the leadership position that we have taken and the fact that we are moving so much more quickly than they are?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend, who knows this area so well, has raised an important point. I hope to be able to reassure him that we will be able to continue to use our influence to encourage the European Union to raise its game and to reach the high standards that we do, but I agree with him that this will be an additional concern, on which we will have to work to try to deliver.

It is true that we had to make tough decisions on renewable energy when we came into office last year, reflecting the need to cut costs and the need for us to stand on their own two feet. I will not shy away from taking tough decisions. We need technologies that are low cost and clean, to protect bill payers.

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): The Secretary of State mentioned India as being among the countries standing by us in respect of investment. Given that about 2,400 coal-fired power stations are planned or under construction around the world, including in India and China, does she agree that cancelling the carbon capture and storage project represents a massive missed opportunity for this country?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have been through the issue of CCS many times. We would like to have a CCS programme and we are working on an industrial strategy to address having such a programme. I know that he has played an important part, working with Lord Oxburgh in the other place, in ensuring that we put together a clear plan. At the time, we could not go ahead with the £1 billion that had been planned for the CCS proposal, but it is not off the table at all. We are still working towards having some sort of CCS proposals.

Our commitment to decarbonisation is clear, with £13 billion of investment in renewable electricity in 2015 alone and with investment in renewables increasing by 42% since 2010. We have already set out funding to be provided through auctions during this Parliament to support up to 4 GW of new offshore wind and other renewable technologies, and with the potential for deployment of up to 10 GW in total between 2020 and 2030 if the costs continue to come down. We are also making real progress to deliver new nuclear power in the UK, addressing a legacy of underinvestment. We have announced record investment in new heat networks to enable innovative ways of heating our homes and businesses. And we will lead the world by consulting on closing unabated coal-fired power stations. That commitment has been praised across the world, and we will be setting out further details of it soon.

All those commitments remain in place. They will help us to dramatically rebuild our energy infrastructure and they are underpinned by our commitment to carbon budgets, which is why the CBI, the EEF, businesses and investors from a wide range of sectors were all so supportive of our decision to set the fifth carbon budget.

We have a proud history of energy innovation. The world’s first coal-fired power station was built on the banks of the Thames in the late 1800s. The world’s first nuclear power station was opened by Her Majesty the Queen in Cumbria in 1956. And well before the EU referendum had begun in earnest, my Department was making sure that this country would remain at the forefront of energy and climate change innovation. That is why, as a Government, we have committed more than £500 million over this spending review to supporting new energy technologies. That means supporting entrepreneurs as they look to develop the innovations of the future—in storage, in energy efficiency and in renewables. As part of that programme, we will build on the UK’s expertise in nuclear innovation. At least half our innovation spending will go towards nuclear research and development. That will support our centres of excellence in Cumbria, Manchester, Sheffield and Preston. Our nuclear programme will include a competition to develop a small modular nuclear reactor—potentially one of the most exciting innovations in the energy sector.
Although I have focused primarily on energy and climate change, we must not forget the trade and businesses surrounding the environment and agricultural sectors, which are so profoundly affected by our decisions on tackling rising global temperatures. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs continues to engage with farmers, businesses and environmental groups to ensure that their voices are heard. It has been made clear to them that there will be no immediate changes and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State will address the environmental issues later.

Trading energy within Europe and being an entry point into Europe for the rest of the world has provided significant advantages. Europe has led the world on acting to address climate change. The economic imperative that drove those relationships has not changed and openness to trade remains central to who we are as a country. As the Prime Minister has repeatedly said, we will work towards the best deal for Britain. As I have said, our challenges remain the same: securing our energy supply, keeping bills low, building a low-carbon infrastructure, and protecting the environment and farming. Our commitment to them is unbowed.

1.40 pm

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): This is a good debate to be having and I thank the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), and the Labour Front Bench team for giving us the opportunity. It is a shame, however, that the hon. Gentleman did not get beyond his introductory remarks in what was an excellent overview of the issues.

SNP history is being made today in that it is the first time that the full force of “Team Callum” has been deployed at the same time. We will hear later from my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr)—or, as I like to call him, the junior member of the team.

Today’s debate feels a little bit like the last day of school. There is a little bit more work to do, but not a huge amount of Government work is going on as we discuss things, pick over the bones of Brexit and ask questions about how we go forward. I am sure that the Secretary of State is pleased—as we all are—that we have a new Prime Minister because that will help to ease some of the uncertainties that were building up and it is welcome that we will not have several weeks of uncertainty. I hope that the Government use the summer recess to come up with some plans, because plans are badly needed.

Last week, we discussed the excellent Energy and Climate Change Committee report on investor confidence and were able to discuss some of the issues affecting the sector that have been exacerbated by the Brexit vote. It is fair to say and it bears repeating time and again that Scotland did not vote for Brexit, and we will be doing everything in our power to ensure that we do not leave. We should change the lexicon slightly and refer either to “Exit” or perhaps “Wexit”. Scotland is not for leaving, and my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr)—or, as I like to call him, the junior member of the team—will work towards the best deal for Britain. As I have said, our challenges remain the same: securing our energy supply, keeping bills low, building a low-carbon infrastructure, and protecting the environment and farming. Our commitment to them is unbowed.

Callum McCaig: Thank you for giving us the opportunity. It is a shame, however, that the hon. Gentleman did not get beyond his introductory remarks in what was an excellent overview of the issues. SNP history is being made today in that it is the first time that the full force of “Team Callum” has been deployed at the same time. We will hear later from my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr)—or, as I like to call him, the junior member of the team.

Today’s debate feels a little bit like the last day of school. There is a little bit more work to do, but not a huge amount of Government work is going on as we discuss things, pick over the bones of Brexit and ask questions about how we go forward. I am sure that the Secretary of State is pleased—as we all are—that we have a new Prime Minister because that will help to ease some of the uncertainties that were building up and it is welcome that we will not have several weeks of uncertainty. I hope that the Government use the summer recess to come up with some plans, because plans are badly needed.

Last week, we discussed the excellent Energy and Climate Change Committee report on investor confidence and were able to discuss some of the issues affecting the sector that have been exacerbated by the Brexit vote. It is fair to say and it bears repeating time and again that Scotland did not vote for Brexit, and we will be doing everything in our power to ensure that we do not leave. We should change the lexicon slightly and refer either to “Exit” or perhaps “Wexit”. Scotland is not for leaving, and our Parliament and Government have united around the SNP history is being made today in that it is the first time that the full force of “Team Callum” has been deployed at the same time. We will hear later from my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr)—or, as I like to call him, the junior member of the team—will work towards the best deal for Britain. As I have said, our challenges remain the same: securing our energy supply, keeping bills low, building a low-carbon infrastructure, and protecting the environment and farming. Our commitment to them is unbowed.

On energy bills, The Guardian reports today on uSwitch research suggesting that, since 23 June, 12 providers have pulled their cheapest fixed-rate tariffs and replaced them with more expensive deals. That is the impact of Brexit, which will be felt by consumers and those who can ill afford to pay more. The weak pound will have another cost impact as the UK is a net importer of electricity. Such things will drive up bills and are an unfortunate consequence of the Brexit vote. The future of interconnection is also uncertain. Interconnection is important and represents a valuable and sensible Government aim. I have often said that we should not see it as a way of importing cheap electricity from the continent, as the Secretary of State said in her “reset” speech; we should be using it to export electricity to the continent. We should be investing in domestic, low-carbon electricity generation, for which Scotland has immense and highly enviable potential.

The prospect of cheap electricity from the continent is also slightly questionable. Exchange rates will obviously change over time, but the assumptions about future interconnection decisions built into the sums might not look so good when the pound is not faring so well against the euro. Such things will come out in the wash, as we say in Scotland, but we need to look at energy policy and interconnection to see whether it is the right thing to do.

Hinkley is another big question about which we have had some discussion and it will come as no surprise to anyone on the Government Benches that the SNP is not in favour of it. We have discussed it in a number of respects and I am sure that the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr) will discuss things, pick over the bones of Brexit and ask questions about how we go forward. I am sure that the Government use the summer recess to come up with some plans, because plans are badly needed.

Caroline Lucas: To give some shape to the hole that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, does he agree that it is shocking that the expected fall in wholesale electricity prices has driven up the Government’s estimate of the whole lifetime cost of Hinkley to £37 billion from the £14 billion of only a year ago?

Callum McCaig: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. The costs are eye-watering. Given the extent to which Hinkley is an international project, the costs could rise even further still. It is time to have a sincere look at the plans and to decide whether the project is possible, but I strongly assume that it is not, so we require a back-up plan. If we do not address the huge strains on our energy system, the bread and butter of keeping the lights on will be put in jeopardy—perhaps not today but in the decades to come. It is incumbent upon the Government and the Department of Energy and Climate Change to act now.

We also need clarity from the Government on the position of the internal energy market in the European Union. The Vivid Economics report that was cited last week and again today about the potential of being outwith the system adding £500 million per annum to
the costs of our energy system is sobering. When DECC and the Government as a whole are engaged in their summer homework of working out how to get out of this particular pickle, I suggest that we keep the co-operation of the IEM should be high up the agenda because it delivers for us here and for folks abroad. It will help us to meet the trilemma of energy costs and should not be sold down the river lightly.

To maintain security of supply, the time has come to scrap Hinkley and to invest in viable and cheaper forms of domestic energy, including onshore wind, on which we need to lift the embargo. We need the contract for difference auctions that the Secretary of State has mentioned. They should be as wide as possible, technology neutral—as they are supposed to be—and no one should be excluded from bidding. We need to get serious about building the suggested new gas plants, and I will make the case for Scotland again: if we can get the anomaly of transmission charging sorted, we are ready to go with gas plants in Scotland that will contribute significantly to reducing the forthcoming hole in energy production.

Above all, we need to invest in energy efficiency. The Scottish Government are doing strong work and that needs to be replicated right across these islands. If we are to deal with an ever more challenging set of energy circumstances, including where we get it from, the best way is to use less of it. The benefits for everyone are substantial in the long term.

On climate change, I agree with the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), who is no longer present, that it is regrettable that the UK will not be a member of the European Union. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for her role in the Paris talks, where the UK played a strong hand—perhaps not as strong as I and others would have liked, but it was played well and resulted in a pretty good deal. The fact we are no longer going to be at the heart of the decision-making process is regrettable, because the UK can be proud of what it has done on tackling climate change and has more it could offer the EU. We need to work out how that will happen in a renewed relationship with the EU, but there will be an absence and that is regrettable.

I have some specific questions to ask about what the process will be and what the impact of Brexit is on our commitments from the Paris talks, which have been touched upon. Our nationally defined contribution was the European Union’s NDC, and I am not clear whether that still applies to us. I assume it does, as we are still a member, but we can and should do more. I am also unclear about some issues on the ratification of the deal. Do we have to ratify this before the Brexit deal is concluded? Is there an impact on the EU as a whole? I understand that the EU ratification process requires all member states to ratify before the EU can ratify it as a whole. Ultimately, the UN requires ratification by the 55 countries that account for 55% of the emissions. So are there implications for us? Are there implications for ratification by the EU? Are there implications for the whole deal if we are not able to do that?

Amber Rudd: I may not answer all the hon. Gentleman’s questions in this intervention, but let me say, as I did not pick this up from the questions put by the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) either, that we are pushing for early ratification of the Paris treaty on behalf of the United Kingdom.

Callum McCaig: I thank the Secretary of State for that intervention and very much welcome it; that is progress and I hope it can be done. I do not think there will be any opposition on that—none will come from Scottish National party Members.

I do not want to go through the negativities, but on the eve of the Paris summit we had the sweet and the sour. We had the sour on CCS, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell) referred. The sweet was the commitment from the Secretary of State and the Government on coal. That was welcome and it was a significant step forward, but are there questions about its deliverability now? I think that there are, as the commitment had a subtle caveat, which was that it would be done only if and when it was possible. The combination of the effects on investor confidence and the lack of clarity on a number of these things will make it more difficult to meet the conditions required to have that coal taken off the system. There is a requirement to look at that again. Above all, although we all welcome the fact that we are getting the fifth carbon budget and that it agreed with the recommendations of the Committee on Climate Change, we do need the action plan. That is the fundamental thing: the bread and butter of this is how we do it. The ambition, determination and commitment is there, but it will come to be only if we have a viable plan. I do think this is achievable, but it has become more uncertain because of the Brexit vote.

In conclusion, yesterday’s events probably put us in a better place than many of us expected to be in. We do not have the added unwelcome uncertainty of a nine-week leadership contest, but a power of work needs to be done by Government over the summer. I hope the Secretary of State continues in her post to do that. I look forward to continuing to work with her and to marking her homework after the summer recess.

1.53 pm

Mr Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in today’s debate. Oppositions, being Oppositions, often fire questions at Governments and this is a particularly difficult time for a Government to answer all the questions. We are about to change Prime Minister, there will probably be a substantial reshuffle in the Government and Ministers will then get down to dealing with the consequences of what the British people have decided.

Many of the points made by the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) were, “What’s going to happen with regulations?” and, “What’s going to happen with things we have signed up to?” I do not believe this Parliament is going to go through every piece of European legislation we have passed over the past 40 years and decide whether we want to keep it or not. The most likely outcome is enabling legislation that rolls everything we have agreed with the EU into UK legislation, with this Government and future Governments at their leisure then being able to pick through what they want to do. That is the most sensible approach. It may mean that we get rid of some legislation in some areas and in others we strengthen it. Whatever the outcome, this Parliament will make sure it picks what is best for our country. We must bear in mind that quite a lot of the legislation has been agreed with 27 other states. Some of it may not be that applicable or relevant to us, but there may be things where we want to improve standards. As my hon. Friend
Geraint Davies: 

Mr Symms: Of course, things move on. My basic point is that just because we are out of the EU does not mean this Parliament cannot make sensible decisions about how to protect our citizens from things such as the hon. Lady mentions.

Mary Creagh: The hon. Gentleman said that most of our air quality legislation predates the EU, but of course the Clean Air Act 1956 was all about stopping people burning things in London and creating the big smogs—it made no mention about diesel particulate matter, because diesel cars had not been invented then.

Mr Symms: Of course, things move on. My basic point is that just because we are out of the EU does not mean this Parliament cannot make sensible decisions about how to protect our citizens from things such as the hon. Lady mentions.

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Mr Symms: Of course, things move on. My basic point is that just because we are out of the EU does not mean this Parliament cannot make sensible decisions about how to protect our citizens from things such as the hon. Lady mentions.
of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), for his work in this area.

Geraint Davies: Does my hon. Friend and colleague agree that one of the things that we found in the Committee’s study was, in essence, that the European Union is a union, which therefore has minimum standards that are ratcheted up? It does not allow individual members to undercut other members on the environment, which means that there is a platform across Europe, and across the globe as well, of best practice.

Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but of course the setting of those minimum standards does not prevent individual member states from going above and beyond them. Vital for business, it also provides a common baseline and a harmonised market for products. That is absolutely crucial for UK businesses as we move forward into the uncertainties of a Brexit world.

EU membership is also key for air quality. Successive Governments have dragged their feet on this very difficult issue. Since 2010, the UK has been in breach of EU legal air quality limits in 31 of its 43 clean air zones, and one of those is in my constituency of Wakefield. Although London tends to get all the attention—as a cyclist in London I am certainly aware of the very high pollution levels—constituencies such as Wakefield with the M1 and M62 crossing by it have severe burdens of air pollution. Levels—constituencies such as Wakefield with the M1 and M62 crossing by it—have severe burdens of cardiovascular disease and lung disease as a result of the breaching of those limits.

EU legislation has allowed UK campaigners to hold the Government to account. The High Court has ordered Ministers from the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs to come up with new air quality plans. In April, those Ministers were back in court over allegations that their plans were still insufficient to bring the UK’s air quality in line with EU minimum standards. There is a series of question marks about what will happen to air pollution standards in the brave new Brexit world.

On biodiversity, the nature directives have preserved some of the most treasured places, plants and species in our country. Many of our best-loved sites, such as Flamborough Head, Dartmoor and Snowdonia, are protected by the EU.

Caroline Lucas: The birds and habitats directives are the real jewels in the crown of our environmental protection. Does the hon. Lady agree that, even if we do keep them in British legislation—as I hope we do—we must do is ensure that there is a proper enforcement mechanism? That is what the EU has provided us with, and we will need to create a new enforcement mechanism that is as rigorous as possible.

Mary Creagh: I do not think that anything can be guaranteed in this world. The first step is to hear from Ministers, but it is said that today is like the last day of term. I wish the Under-Secretary well in whatever future role he is called on to play in the Government. He has been an excellent Minister, and he has appeared before the Environmental Audit Committee many times. I do not think that anything should be taken for granted. As a pro-remain campaigner, I took part in many debates during the EU referendum campaign, and I heard many different versions of Brexit depending on whom I was debating with.

In an interview with The Guardian, the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) described the birds and habitats directives as “spirit crushing”. He said that if we voted to leave, “they would go”. We will have to see whether his version of events is the same as that of the new Prime Minister. He also said that leaving the EU would free up both common agricultural payments and up to £2 billion in “insurance and incentives” for farmers. Nowhere in that do I hear anything about the need for protecting species, wildlife, and plant life. There is no mention of the vital services provided by soils and bogs or of the need for the restoration of bogs and peatlands, which we recommended just a month ago in our excellent report on soil, and which was echoed this morning by the Adaptation Sub-Committee report of the Committee on Climate Change. So, we have seen otters, hen harriers and bitterns making a comeback, and the referendum result could put all that progress at risk.

The EU has also played a key role in promoting investment in sustainable businesses and technologies. Investors need clear policy signals emanating from strong legislative frameworks, and, to be fair, those frameworks are provided by the Climate Change Act 2015. However, our Committee has received some mixed messages from the current inquiries into both the Department for Transport and the Treasury. In particular, I posed a question on the cancellation of the carbon capture and storage competition, which has had a massive debilitating effect on investor confidence. We do not want to get into a position where consumers are not spending and investors are not investing, because that is absolutely disastrous not just for the economy, but for the UK’s environmental progress.

Twenty years ago, in 1997, the UK sent almost all of our household waste to landfill. Now we recycle almost 45% of it, although I was disappointed to see those numbers slightly dip last year. The Treasury introduced the landfill tax escalator in response to the EU landfill directive. Over the past five years, according to the Environmental Services Association, the waste and resources management sector has invested £5 billion in new infrastructure thanks to this long-term policy signal. Those policy signals are vital as is the need to keep investing in infrastructure if we are to meet those 2020 waste targets—if they still apply in UK law. [Interruption.] A sip of gin to keep me going. A slice next time, please.

I shall end on the topic of microplastic pollution. The Committee is concluding its inquiry into microplastics—tiny particles of plastic, which can come from larger particles of plastic that are broken down, or from products such as shaving foams, deodorants, toothpastes and facial scrubs. Unfortunately, it seems to be the higher-end products that have not been cleaned up as quickly as the mass volume scrubs. We are finding that the particles have washed down the sink, passed through sewage filtration systems and ended up in the sea. Anyone who has had a dozen or half a dozen oysters recently will have consumed about 50 microplastic particles. For those of us who like seafood, that is something to reflect on. Bon appétit.

Over a third of fish in the English channel are now contaminated with microplastics. As an island nation we must take the problem of microplastic pollution seriously. The way to solve the problem is to work with
our partners in the EU. Those are not my words. It is what the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs told our Committee when he gave evidence just before the referendum on 23 June. If the EU takes action to address an environmental problem, it creates not only a level playing field for businesses, but an opportunity to market environmental solutions.

Brexit raises a series of questions. There is the issue of the circular economy package, which is the EU’s drive to get us to reduce waste, recycle more and have a secure and sustainable supply of raw materials, such as paper, glass and plastics. That would have driven new, green jobs in the UK economy. The decision to abandon all that has left investors reeling.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), the shadow Secretary of State, about Siemens’ decision to freeze its investment in the wind industry in Yorkshire, Hull and the Humber and we face a protracted period of uncertainty. When the Under-Secretary of State appeared before our Committee as part of that EU inquiry, he told us that the vote to leave would result in a “long and tortuous” negotiation. That has not even begun yet.

The period ahead is fraught with risks. The UK risks not being regarded as a safe bet, and investors may no longer wish to invest their cash in UK businesses. Significantly, contracts are no longer being signed in London because the risk of London no longer being part of the European single market means that people want contracts to be signed in a European country so that if something goes wrong, contract law will be enforceable across all the countries of the European Union. That will have a very big effect on our financial and legal services.

Geraint Davies: Does my hon. Friend agree that in the emerging recycling market across Europe, with us being at arm’s length and possibly facing tariffs, regulations and so on, people will invest in Europe rather than in Britain?

Mary Creagh: That is the point I was making. When looking at where to put new foreign direct investment, investors will look again and go to the area of least risk. Those risks are reflected in the economy.

We found out from our inquiry that the environment and the UK’s membership of the EU had been a two-way street. It forced us to take action much more quickly on waste and on water, but it also acted as a platform from which we could project our own British values, particularly in relation to climate change. DECC Minister Lord Bourne told the Committee that the UK’s voice was louder in Paris because we were part of a club of 28 countries. I worry about the global agreement reached at Paris and the possible damage to achieving those climate change targets as a result of our withdrawing from the European Union.

In the 1970s the UK was the “dirty man” of Europe. Economically, we were the “sick man” of Europe. Since then we have cleaner beaches, we drive more fuel-efficient cars, we have more fuel-efficient vacuum cleaners, and we can hold the Government to account on air pollution. Environmental problems do not respect borders, and require long-term solutions—much longer than the five-year term of a Government or, in some cases, the two-year term of a Treasury Minister.

EU membership has allowed the UK to be a world leader in tackling environmental problems with our brilliant science base and our pragmatic civil service to provide good nuts-and-bolts solutions to many of the challenges we face, and created British business as a world leader, whether through its retrofitting diesel buses in China or helping the Indian Government with water management for the Ganges delta. These are knowledge and services that our country can export proudly because we have been clean in the European Union. The result of the referendum has caused a great deal of political and economic uncertainty. I hope we will get some reassurances from the Government about the threats that it poses to our common home, and the actions that any new Government will take to ensure that we leave a better future for our children.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), for whom I have a great deal of respect in her role as Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, although I would like to be a little more positive about life post-EU than she was.

I am pleased to speak about the important subject of post-EU referendum implications for energy and the environment. The environment is something that we cannot avoid. It affects us all: the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat and the soils that produce it, the trees that take in the carbon dioxide, the flora, the fauna, the landscape—everything we touch. It is essential that we deliver policies to determine that we can have a healthy life, and that all God’s creatures can have a healthy life, too.

As we have heard many times today, much of our environmental legislation stems from Europe. We have been instrumental in writing much of it: the birds directive, the habitats directive, the bathing water directive and the air quality directive. The motion states that in the run-up to the EU referendum, “little mention” was made of environmental protection. Actually, a lot of people, including myself and some of my hon. Friends who are in the Chamber, as well as many from the Environmentalists for Europe group, did refer to environmental aspects. Interestingly, it was the media who gave the environment little coverage, as statistics show that the environment featured in only 1.7% of the referendum coverage in all media, and 0% of television coverage. People were talking about it, but that was not picked up, and that is one of the issues we face.

Once one starts talking about the environment, people engage with it, so I have set up an environment forum in Taunton Deane. I held a debate in the forum about the EU and the environment. Opinion was not in favour of one side or the other, but the event was a big talking point, and more than 100 people turned up to it, which shows that there is interest in the subject. We are where we are, however. We are out of Europe, and we have to move forward positively.

I shall mention a few small concerns that have arisen to show that we have some immediate problems to sort out. For example, I have been contacted by a number of
standards. We have heard the shocking statistic that annually—on how we are doing. I urge the Government to have a system of checking and reporting back—I suggest them. We must therefore ensure that we set targets and it was the EU that took us to task if we did not hit legislation sets our targets regarding air and water pollution, and reduce our terrible air pollution statistics. All that is possible with clear planning for and thought about land use.

We should, for example, think about how infrastructure works when it goes through special landscapes or land with ancient trees. We should think about how our homes can be more sustainable. We have touched on all this, and I am pleased the Government are undertaking an inquiry to look again at sustainable urban drainage system, and the carbon efficiency and energy efficiency of homes, but we need to build those things in.

We should also think about how we reduce the impact of flooding. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is carrying out an inquiry into flooding, which will bring forward really useful ideas about how to build flood resilience into our land use plans. This is the time to get all these things in, so we have a great opportunity. We can also do more on low-carbon energy generation and transport so that we have lower emissions and reduce our terrible air pollution statistics. All that is possible with clear planning for and thought about land use.

I have talked to lots of bodies about these issues, from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, to the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust, the Ancient Tree Forum and the Soil Association. However, I have also spoken to farmers and landowners, and I reiterate that we have to work with and support them if we are to deliver what we need.

I would like to suggest some things that we should consider. As the hon. Member for Wakefield said, EU legislation sets our targets regarding air and water pollution, and it was the EU that took us to task if we did not hit them. We must therefore ensure that we set targets and have a system of checking and reporting back—I suggest annually—on how we are doing. I urge the Government to ensure that we do not lower our air or water-quality standards. We have heard the shocking statistic that 50,000 people a year die from air pollution-related diseases, so we would be crazy to lower those standards. I am sure that the Minister is listening to that point.

I have a few thoughts about how to proceed, although some have been mentioned by other Members. Let us transpose the relevant EU directives into UK law—we can then amend them as we think fit, but let us at least have them—and let us keep special areas of conservation. Let us also do more on the world stage, because we really need to. We need to increase our global influence with bodies such as the UN and the OECD. The Bern convention and the animal welfare legislation are really important, and we also need to stay part of Natura 2000.

I applaud the fact that DEFRA has been working away on its—I will not say elusive—25-year plans for farming and the environment. That is excellent, but let us see those plans as soon as possible, and let us make sure that the environment is inextricably interwoven with farming production targets. We have a great opportunity, so let us make greening slightly less complicated for farmers. Most farmers are keen to undertake aspects of greening, but some of the forms that they have to fill out and the demands that are placed on them are so tortuously complicated—I heard this only this morning from a barn owl expert who works with farmers across the south-west—that some farmers are thinking of not bothering in the future if we cannot simplify the system. To deliver what we need to deliver, we need to make things easy to do.

While we are rewriting our plans, let us get in some soil monitoring. Let us recognise that soil is an ecosystem, not just a growing medium to be abused. Let us also deal with the circular economy. DEFRA suggests that that could bring in £22 billion of savings, so let us look at that and build it all in.

I reiterate that subsidies will have to be part of the system, but let us work out how they are given to our farmers and landowners. I suggest that they should not just be based on land ownership, but that farmers and landowners should have to deliver something for them, whether that is green services or food production. Perhaps caps should be put in place. If someone has 3,000 acres of arable land in the east, is it right that they clock up so much per hectare? Why not have a cap so that everything is on a level playing field? Farmers and landowners are discussing these issues countrywide, as are environmental organisations, so let us put all their findings together and build them into our forward-thinking plan.

Finally, I am going to touch on energy, because it is referred to in the motion. I am pleased that the Energy Secretary has committed to delivering secure, affordable and clean energy. I welcome the system that is enabling consumers to switch to lower-cost energy to help with bills. I really welcome the commitment to continue leading on climate change, to which many colleagues have referred. I also welcome early ratification of the Paris agreement, and I reiterate praise for the proposed climate change system, which the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig) referred to, so I think we are all together on that.

The Government have committed to low-carbon energy. They are phasing out coal and are also committed to nuclear. The south-west is pressing ahead with the commitment on Hinkley Point, which will be a crucial part of our economy, delivering 7% of our energy.
welcome the Government’s involvement in establishing the National College for Nuclear, and there will be a big spin-off for Somerset, where Bridgewater College has just linked up with Somerset College in my constituency. That is spawning not only new engineers, but the new skills that we will need to move forward in the low-carbon energy sector that has to be part of our brave new world.

To conclude, let us not be negative. The Government must listen—I am absolutely sure that they are listening. We must link farming closely with the environment for the good of the nation. That will deliver for the environment and, indeed, for us all, in terms of health, wellbeing and life chances.

2.26 pm

[Rebecca Pow]

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for graciously allowing me to make my maiden speech in this really important debate. I am deeply honoured to be standing in this Chamber as the new Member of Parliament for Tooting. When I think about this Chamber’s long and proud history, and about the women and men who have sat here before me, and all they have achieved, I feel humbled. They include Clement Attlee, Nye Bevan and, very recently, Jo Cox, to name but a few. I am also reminded of the vast responsibilities that we in this Chamber are entrusted with over the coming years and the magnitude of what we must achieve for our country. I would like to talk a little about that task and about the mindset with which we should approach it.

First, however, I would like to talk about where I come from—Tooting. It is hard for me to adequately express my gratitude to the people of Tooting for putting their trust in me. During my campaign, I said I would be a passionate, energetic and tireless representative for absolutely everyone in my constituency, and it is with that promise that I intend to serve.

Just two months ago, I was working day and night on our NHS frontline in A&E as an emergency doctor. Now I find myself wandering the corridors of Westminster, grappling with vast piles of dry booklets and mistaking Members’ offices for lady Members’ rooms—it has happened.

It was a piece of good news that set me on the journey that brings me here today: the election of our new Mayor of London, my good friend Sadiq Khan, with the largest personal mandate in British political history. From the first time I met Sadiq, it was clear that he was destined for greatness. When I became a councillor, he took the time to offer me support and guidance, as he remembered well what it was like for someone to suddenly find themselves holding the responsibilities of elected office. Sadiq spent 11 years working tirelessly for the people of Tooting. His commitment to equality, justice and inclusivity is inspirational. Whether he is celebrating International Women’s Day year after year, breaking bread with every religious community, or talking to children about how they can achieve no matter what their background, Sadiq’s interactions are always warm and welcoming. He truly believes in the power of people and communities, as he has shown throughout his time representing Tooting—and now the great city of London.

He has made improving the environment a top priority in City Hall, and has already started tackling the important issue of air quality in London. This debate gives us an opportunity again to see what a difference can be made in the House when we get legislation right—legislation like the Clean Air Act 1956, which was passed 60 years ago following the London smogs of the 1950s.

I will endeavour to build upon Sadiq’s fine legacy, standing tall for all of Tooting. Sadiq’s shoes are big to fill, but then I have the benefit of much higher heels to help! We share a lot in our histories and our characters: our surname; a love of football; and a keen interest in boxing. Perhaps most importantly, Sadiq and I are children of Tooting who are now choosing to raise our families in the very streets where we grew up. We have one important difference, though: my dad was not a bus driver—[Laughter.] However, my mum did work in the local petrol station, so—who knows?—perhaps Sadiq’s father filled up his bus there.

As a Tooting girl through and through, I never like it when people say, “Tooting is becoming a fantastic place to live.” Anyone who has lived there for as long as I have knows that it has always been great, with the wonderful green open spaces of Tooting and Wandsworth commons, the iconic Tooting market, and the lido, which has been open for residents of Tooting to swim outdoors for 110 years. There has always been a rich tapestry of communities living harmoniously alongside one another. That unity should be celebrated, and it will be celebrated. I will defend it with every fibre of my being. That unity is woven into me—it is an essential part of who I am. When people ask me where I am from, I say: “I’m half Polish, half Pakistani; raised in England; married a Welshman; and I am 100% Tooting.”

There is a serious point in this, though: what binds us together. In Tooting and across the country, it is a sense of common purpose. The selflessness that drives community groups and charities binds us together. Tooting’s many local businesses, traditional and modern, not only fuel our thriving economy, but bind us together. St George’s hospital and our NHS, where everyone is treated with equal concern, based not on their need, bind us together. In these fragile times, we should never forget that these charities, businesses and proud national institutions are important not only because they provide us a service or grow our economy, but because they bind us together as local residents, as citizens, and as human beings, too.

So why am I here now? Well, life was not easy growing up, but I always had the bedrock that was the love and support of my mum, Maria, even in the face of adversity. She was on her own, a single mum, but like a small army, showering my brother and me with praise and providing a palpable sense of possibility. She gave me hope. She showed my brother and me that even people from our background can achieve anything with hard work and determination. She instilled in me a deep-rooted determination to help others who have seen hardship and who fight for social justice. But I am also here because of Labour. My dream of becoming a doctor became a reality not only through my own hard work and support from my family, but because a Labour Government made it financially possible for me to access a world-class medical school at Cambridge. That
is one reason why my ambition will always be for Labour to win power, not just to sit on these Opposition Benches.

I have served in an ice cream shop, I have fried eggs at a hotel, and I have aided patients, but my proudest job is being a wife and a mother. My heart bursts with the love I have for my husband, Tudor, and my two young daughters, Anaiyah, aged three, and Layla, aged just one. They are an immense source of strength to me, and will continue to be so over the coming years.

We must now all look to those coming years. They will be turbulent and challenging, and in them history will be made. This House will be responsible for shaping Britain’s future in the 21st century by guiding, overseeing, and providing accountability for the most important negotiations our country will have seen for decades. In that period, important and defining questions will be asked about who we are as a nation and who we want to be, about the legacy we will leave the next generation and the generations after that, and about the relationships we want to have with our friends and allies across the whole world.

Britain has always been an outward-looking country— one that does not shy away from the challenges that face us all. My experience as a doctor, and internationally all over the world, has taught me a lot about those challenges. I have lived and worked in squalid refugee camps, pulled dead bodies out of floodwater and watched children suffer as victims of war. I have witnessed aching, aching suffering. My commitment is to be a voice for those who have none, to find hope for those who have lost it, and to build strength for those who are weak, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. We all bleed, we all breathe, and we all feel pain.

The sound of a parent losing a child is an international language. It is, tragically, a sound that is increasingly common in our unstable world.

We live in a time of insecurity and change without parallel in recent history. Europe is in flux. The middle east is in crisis. The axis of global power is shifting. The old certainties no longer seem so certain. It is all too easy to write of calls for international social justice as irrelevant when we ourselves live in such difficult and uncertain times— “We have so much to do to sort out our own country; why should we be thinking about responsibilities overseas?” That is to misunderstand what social justice is about. It is not simply a goal to be ranked and prioritised in relation to other goals; it is about how we think and who we are. It applies to everything we do, whether protecting our NHS in the UK, protecting workers’ rights in our negotiations with the EU, or working to seek peace in Syria and Yemen. Everywhere I look, there is work to do.

Here at home, I pledge to bring my years of experience in, and deep commitment to, our NHS in order to stand up for it. I could not be prouder of my NHS colleagues at St George’s hospital and elsewhere who work day and night, with little thanks for the work they do. Anyone who has worked in the NHS—indeed, anyone who has worked in any of our vital emergency services—knows well the feeling of leaving behind the comfort of home and family, day after day, night after night, selflessly to work gruelling hours in difficult circumstances, and serving the communities we love without complaint. I will work to protect them from the attacks they are under. Our NHS staff see work as a vocation, not as a job. This is why they have been so damaged by the recent mishandling of the junior doctors contract, and it is why nurses are so distraught when they see their bursaries axed. It is morally reprehensible that student nurses are forced to seek food banks, or that women in medicine are penalised for having children.

I have already asked two questions in my short time in this House, and I am afraid I shall not stop asking questions until I get satisfactory answers. In these times, who knows how long I may be sitting here? What I do know, and what I can tell Members, is that I am going to make every single minute, every single day, count for the people of Tooting, and of Great Britain and the United Kingdom.

2.38 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What an absolutely fantastic, brilliant maiden speech we have just heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan). I have served in this House for 14 years, and I have to say that that is the best maiden speech I have ever heard. It was eloquent, moving and witty. It talked about Tooting, about history, and about where we are and where we are going. My hon. Friend is a great credit to Tooting, and a great credit to her family. I know that her mother, Maria, is here, as are her brother, her best friend, Monique, her husband, Tudor, who I am very pleased to hear is from Neath in Wales—I hope to be sharing a Joe’s ice cream later in the summer if all goes well—and her supporters in the Gallery. [HON. MEMBERS: “And the Mayor of London.”] I will be mentioning the Mayor of London. It is fantastic to hear about Tooting and it is great to have the Mayor of London back with us today.

This debate is about the environment. Our concern as we break free from Europe is that we will no longer have mandatory standards of air quality. I am very proud that Sadiq Khan, our Mayor of London, has made headway after two terms of, frankly, indolence from the previous Mayor in terms of making progress on air quality. There are about 9,500 premature deaths a year in London alone as a result of air pollution, largely from diesel cars and vehicles. The number across Britain, according to the Royal College of Physicians, is 40,000. We are talking about lung disease, heart disease and strokes, and problems for children, whether they are in the classroom or in the womb.

I am very pleased that Sadiq Khan is present. I was with him last week when he launched his new air quality standards on the 60th anniversary of the Clean Air Act 1956, and I look forward to ultra-low emissions zones using the latest technology. The Minister may know of the new technology from America that uses lasers to count the emissions of each pollutant from each car, thereby setting standards for emissions standards.

One of my main concerns about leaving Europe is that mandatory standards will no longer be enforceable in the courts. I am glad that ClientEarth is taking the Government to court to ensure that we deliver those standards. The fact that it has to take them to court shows that, left to our own devices, we are in danger of becoming the dirty man of Europe again, which was our embarrassing former status. The World Health Organisation has standards, but they are not enforceable. I hope that the Minister will say that we will sustain and
honour our commitments not just to air quality standards, but to all EU standards. We have a responsibility to make future laws ourselves, but unless they are integrated and harmonious they will not work as a platform to make the world a more sustainable place.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My hon. Friend has touched on the important issue of the fines levied for breaches of air quality standards. Does he think that there is an important job to be done in terms of joined-up government? The British Government will pass the fines down to local government, even though issues such as local government housing targets are also controlled by central Government. That means that not only will local government have to approve new developments in areas of towns and cities that suffer from poor air quality, but the British Government will pass down fines to it for doing so.

Geraint Davies: That is a concern. I promoted the Air Quality (Diesel Emissions in Urban Centres) Bill to give more powers to local authorities, with Government support, to introduce more air quality zones and testing, and to encourage the use of trams and hydrogen and electric-driven transport systems. We need not just a series of zones that have to reach minimum standards, but improved air quality for all people across all our nations. We do not want the Government to pass the buck or to revert to becoming the dirty man of Europe again. We have had a lot of benefits from being in Europe. My constituency of Swansea West has some beautiful, blue flag beaches, and we do not want them to revert to becoming like the old low-tar and high-tar beaches of the past.

Responsibility for research and development in environmental innovation is shared across Europe, but we are in danger of risking that. We were leaders at Kyoto from Europe, and we were leaders in Britain and throughout Europe on the elimination of chlorofluorocarbons and on closing the hole in the ozone layer. We do not want to miss such opportunities in future, but I am sad to say that we are likely to do so.

The Adaptation Sub-Committee of the Committee on Climate Change had a meeting today to discuss the latest problems with adaptation to climate change, including what we have to do in relation to flooding and changes in biodiversity, water supply, health, food and so on. We need to face those big challenges together, so I hope that the Minister will reassure us that we will be working together, not just floating off on our own and becoming worse and worse environmentally.

The environment faces challenges from the negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the EU and the US. Now that we are leaving, we will find that we cannot veto, influence or change those negotiations; we will be a bystander and we will have to live by those rules, which at the moment do not protect the environment from investors. We run the risk of being fined by big fracking companies. Loan Pine sued Canada for hundreds of millions of dollars when there was a moratorium on fracking in Quebec. I do not want that to happen in Wales, Scotland or elsewhere when companies are given the open door by the new Administration.

I am pleased and honoured to be a member of the Council of Europe. I am a rapporteur on both TTIP and fracking, and I hope that the advice from the thorough reports will be taken up by the Government. I am glad to say that I am also a member of the Environmental Audit Committee, and we have said that working together as one with Europe has to be good to retain standards. We do not want to see us undercutting other countries with regard to the environment for competitive reasons, which would bring everybody down.

On climate change, it was agreed in Paris that we should set a target, using the 1750 baseline, for our world temperatures to go up by no more than 2 °C. We have already moved up 1 °C, and, on the basis of carbon dioxide that is in the pipeline, it has been calculated that the figure is already 1.5 °C up, which was the Paris aspiration. That means that we need to move towards zero-carbon technology and carbon capture. Regrettably and shamefully, however, the Government, even before leaving Europe, have abandoned their aspirations and plans for carbon capture. As an environmentalist, I am really concerned not just that we will become the dirty man of Europe, but that we will start playing dirty to reduce standards in order to attract jobs as we face tariffs, which is one of the inevitable consequences of the Brexit vote.

I will present a Bill tomorrow on UK environmental protection and the maintenance of EU standards. It gives the Government the opportunity to sign up to at least keeping the current standards and not to sink back while the EU moves forwards. I hope that that will be agreed.

I view the vote for Brexit with great regret. I hope that we will have a second referendum on the exit package, so that people will know precisely what they are voting for, and if it does not deliver on their reasonable expectations they will have the option of defaulting back to recover membership of the EU again. We will see how it goes. Government Members are shaking their heads, but I do not think that we should continue to walk into what may be an environmental disaster.

Finally, I want to say once more that the hon. Member for Tooting made a fantastic speech.
so the rest of the members have done a bit worse; although that in itself is not a disaster. What is extraordinary is the variability between different countries in Europe on carbon emissions since 1990: Austria has increased emissions by 14%, Ireland by 7% and Poland by 14%; Germany has decreased emissions, but not by anything like as much as we have. It is really quite bizarre.

Quite often, people talk about countries such as China as being the issue when it comes to emissions. However, the reality is that the Chinese are taking the whole issue a great deal more seriously than a number of OECD countries are. China has 40 to 50 nuclear power stations under construction. It increased its proportion of energy from nuclear by 30% last year, and from renewables by 20%. That is a huge effort. The truth is—

The point that we may well be close to 1.5% anyway—it is this: why should we come to the banquet, have only a dessert and be presented with the bill?

David Mowat: I have a lot of sympathy for that argument, and that is why we have to cut more slack for these developing countries. I am going to come on to talk about coal, but in November the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change referred to the Prime Minister of India, Mr Modi, is this: why should we come to the banquet, have only a dessert and be presented with the bill?

I recognise the issue that the hon.

Philip Boswell: I take the hon. Gentleman’s point that China is making commendable progress in respect of nuclear construction. However, is it not also the case that, along with India, it is constructing up to several thousand coal-fired power stations? The argument, as was well put by the Prime Minister of India, Mr Modi, is this: why should we come to the banquet, have only a dessert and be presented with the bill?

David Mowat: I have a lot of sympathy for that argument, and that is why we have to cut more slack for these developing countries. I am going to come on to talk about coal, but in November the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change referred to the Prime Minister of India, Mr Modi, is this: why should we come to the banquet, have only a dessert and be presented with the bill?

I want to talk more widely about why it is that the EU has lost its way on climate policy. There is a fixation on coal in the EU. Germany is often regarded as being a leader on renewables, and it is; Germany has far more renewables than we have. However, it also has much higher carbon emissions than we do. The reason for that is the coal that it has: Germany has four times as much coal as the UK, and it is not four times more populous. There are parallels in other countries. Does it matter? Perhaps not, in one sense; someone has to lead, and it is us. However, the DECC website shows that electricity prices in the UK for domestic consumers are something like 50% above the EU mean—our gas prices are not—and our industrial prices are about 50% higher. Why does that matter? I come from a constituency in the north of England, where we still try to manufacture things. It is very hard to talk about rebalancing the economy and the northern powerhouse on the back of differentially high energy prices.

I do not think that the EU has taken the position that it has on purpose. So why is it that the policy objectives of reducing carbon have not been realised? The first error that was made—this is true of a lot of directives—is that there was confusion as to the target. A lot of the early EU directives were about renewables and not decarbonisation, which is a secondary target. The consequence is that CCS, which we have talked about, was not emphasised, gas as a transition fuel was not emphasised and nuclear was not emphasised—the biggest omission of all. Of all EU electricity, 30% comes from nuclear. The fact that, for many countries in the EU, that is not even regarded as part of the solution is quite bizarre.

Two or three hon. Members this afternoon talked about CCS, and I regret that the UK is not pushing ahead with that. However, it really beggars belief to say that that is a European issue when a number of countries in the EU, including Germany, have banned CCS. It is not a question of not developing it; they have banned it.

The other error that the EU has made is to create a general parity between different types of fossil fuels. Coal and gas are very different indeed in terms of their materiality on this. One reason why the UK does a lot better than the EU is the amount of gas that we use and the fact that we have displaced coal with gas. I like to quote this statistic: if the world were to replace all the coal that we currently burn with gas, that would be equivalent to five times, or a factor of 500%, more renewables. To pretend that that is not part of the solution is just plain wrong. One reason that people regard it as not being part of the solution is that the pathway has been mistaken for the objective.

Yes, at some point we need to get to an emissions level below that which is afforded by gas, but the truth is that emissions are cumulative. The hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) said that we may well be close to 1.5% in terms of particulates and all that goes with them. That is true and it is a cumulative effect. Carbon does not go out of the atmosphere for a very long time. It is not just about pathway. For that reason, gas should have been far more of a factor in this than it has been.

Geraint Davies: On the related matter of where we are, is the hon. Member as concerned as I am about the leakages of methane from fracking, which are 5%, given that methane is 83 times worse than CO₂ in global warming?

David Mowat: I recognise the issue that the hon. Gentleman raises. If methane were being released from fracking at that level, it would represent that percentage. However, I do not think that that is the case in the United States of America. I am prepared to be corrected.
on that, but I do not think anything like that amount of methane is being emitted by fracking in the United States of America.

Geraint Davies: I can provide the hon. Member with satellite evidence of this. The figure is somewhere between 3% and 8%, with the best judgment being that it is 5%. That makes it two and a half times worse than coal in terms of global warming.

David Mowat: I do not accept that that is true, but if it was, it would apply to fracked gas only and not gas generally. Most of our gas is liquefied natural gas from Norway and Russia. That said, various papers have been written on the amount of methane coming out of wells in the United States, and I do not think that the evidence is quite as the hon. Gentleman said. I think we should leave it at that for now, and maybe have a coffee afterwards.

The other thing that was not done was that the EU has no price for carbon. The emissions trading system was an attempt to put in place a price for carbon. However, because of the recession, carbon permits became very cheap indeed and it became no issue at all. We in the UK then established a carbon floor price. The EU Parliament debated that and it was blocked by MEPs, particularly those from Germany, so there is no price of carbon in the EU, which would have fixed some of this.

The result of all this is a policy that overly emphasises renewables as a solution, without taking into account some of the other things that we could have been doing, such as nuclear, CCS and the displacement of coal with gas. Result: we see in Germany a country with very high renewables, but also very high carbon emissions. Something like 15% of Germany’s total energy and 30% of its electricity come from renewables, but because of the amount of coal it produces, its carbon emissions are a third higher per unit of GDP and a third higher per capita than those of the UK.

So, there is an issue with our leaving the EU. It is not an issue of us learning from the EU how to reduce carbon emissions; it is a question of the EU not being held to account for the level of emissions that many of those countries are currently going on with. If Brexit has got a downside in terms of environmental policy around climate change, it is that the leadership that the UK has been able to demonstrate—so far, perhaps unsuccessfully—to the EU on climate targets will not necessarily be so evident in future.

3 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. It was immensely frustrating to me that the environment received so little attention during the referendum campaign, despite the best efforts of my fellow members of the steering group of the cross-party Environmentalists for Europe. It seems like a lifetime ago that I stood on a rather windswept beach in Hove with my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), and Sir Stanley Johnson, the father of the hon. Members for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) and for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), brandishing a beach ball and exhorting people to remain for nature. Brighton and Hove voted to remain, and I am sure that that was entirely down to our efforts with the beach ball that day. I am proud, too, that my constituency voted to remain. The public voted narrowly for Brexit, however, although I do not believe that they voted to remove the environmental protections that have served us so well over the years.

Much that is good has flowed from our EU membership. As my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) and others have said, Britain was once dubbed the “dirty man of Europe”. We used to worry about acid rain, but our sulphur dioxide emissions fell by 89% between 1990 and 2010, and our nitrogen dioxide emissions were down 62% thanks to EU directives, the EU ban on leaded petrol and the requirement for catalytic converters in cars.

Andrew Gwyne: I represent a constituency that has an air quality management area. My hon. Friend will know that there is a public health issue here in respect of obtaining clean air. Does she think that it is incumbent on the Government to tackle the air quality issue so that we narrow the health inequalities that are endemic in constituencies such as mine?

Kerry McCarthy: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Sixty years on from the Clean Air Act 1956, it is clear that many urban areas, in particular—although not just urban areas—are still suffering greatly from air pollution. It is an issue of social justice, because people in poorer communities tend to be most affected. The Government have been taken to court on the matter by ClientEarth and, whether we are in the European Union or outside it, we need to see further action on the issue.

It is hard to believe that we used to allow untreated sewage to flow into our seas before the EU’s bathing water directive forced the UK Government to make our bathing waters fit for swimming and to test for bacteria such as E. coli. In 1990, only 27% of our bathing waters met minimum mandatory standards. By 2014, 99% complied. The EU’s waste framework directive has been the driving force behind our domestic waste policy, requiring us to recycle 50% of household waste by 2020. As we have heard, it looks as though the UK is moving slightly backwards when it comes to progress towards recycling targets, and that needs to be halted.

The nature directive protects our most threatened habitats and birds, with beauty spots such as the New Forest, the Brecon Beacons and Ben Nevis designated as special areas of conservation. Post-Brexit, many of those protections would still apply in certain scenarios, but not in others. There is a lot of uncertainty, and I am keen to hear some early indications from the Minister of what our negotiating stance will be, as well as some reassurance about the importance of such protections. My understanding is that if the UK were to negotiate membership of the EEA, most EU environmental legislation would continue to apply, including measures covering pollution control, chemicals and waste management but not the bathing water directive or the birds and habitats directive. If the UK were outside the EEA, most environmental legislation would cease to apply. The main exception would be when companies sought to export to the EU: they would be obliged to conform to product standards and other requirements in order to do so.
Many EU directives have been transposed into UK law through primary or secondary legislation under Acts other than the European Communities Act 1972, and that legislation would continue to apply until it was changed by Parliament. EU regulations would present a different problem for the Government, however. They are directly applicable in the member states, so they could immediately cease to apply. A thorough audit must be carried out and clear guidance given to the House and the general public—who felt, throughout the referendum campaign, as though they did not really have the information that they needed to make the momentous decision that lay before them—about what protections could be under threat in each possible scenario, so that they can make up their minds about which of the scenarios they ought to support. We also need to know what the Government intend to do in each case.

There are, however, serious doubts about DEFRA’s capacity to do that. We know that the Department was woefully unprepared for a Brexit result; the Secretary of State told us that there was no plan B. The coalition Government slashed DEFRA’s resource budget by 38%, and the Chancellor last year announced a further cut of 15% for this Parliament. DEFRA and its agencies have lost a quarter of their staff. I hope the Minister will be able to tell us how the Department will begin to review and untangle EU directives and regulations when we know it does not have sufficient staff or resources for even its day-to-day work.

I urge the Government to bring in experts from outside Parliament—for example, Professor Tim Lang and the Food Research Collaboration—who are already gathering ideas, meeting, discussing and trying to collate a strategy for how we should proceed. We need to know from the Minister which civil servants from DEFRA and DECC will take part in the EU unit led by the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin), and what their remit will be.

I am concerned that if some in the Government have their way, we will have a bonfire of protections. Some of the most prominent leave campaigners are also climate change deniers, and there has also been much anti-EU rhetoric over the years, casting environmental protections as an over-bureaucratic burden rather than a benefit. The Chancellor, before he became an EU enthusiast, tried to claim that those protections placed “ridiculous costs on British businesses”—[Official Report, 29 November 2011; Vol. 536, c. 808.]

but the Government’s review proved him wrong.

During the referendum campaign, the Minister with responsibility for farming, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), vowed that the nature directives would go after Brexit. He described them as “spirit-crushing green directives”—albeit, to be fair to him, he later said that that comment was slightly misrepresented. He also said that the marine strategy framework directive, which requires member states to achieve good environmental status in marine waters by 2020 and promote a more sustainable approach to marine-related economic and social activities, would go. We need reassurance from the Minister that those voices will not prevail in the post-Brexit scenario.

The European Commission’s “fitness check” of the directives and, tellingly, their regulatory burden, is due to report soon. In the largest response ever to an EU consultation, more than 500,000 people called for the nature laws to be kept and to be better enforced. More than 100,000 of those responses came from UK citizens. British organisations such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds have been instrumental in defending the directives, not just in the UK but across Europe.

Another example of the European Union discussing issues that affect the UK—it is not a question of legally binding obligations being imposed on us, but we certainly ought to be part of the negotiations—is the EU circular economy package, which was agreed at the end of last year. There have already been reports that during the negotiations, the UK tried to water down the package, arguing against mandatory targets and priding ourselves on inserting the word “voluntary” throughout the text. Scotland has brought forward national plans to implement the package, and Wales has its own blueprint for moving to a more circular economy. What will England do now? If the EU circular economy package is properly implemented—that is quite a big “if”—the potential for new jobs and innovative new lines of business is huge. I would like the Minister to reassure us that we will not allow Brexit to derail our progress.

A further example is the neonicotinoids ban. The European Food Safety Authority is reviewing the EU’s restrictions on the use of neonicis and the latest scientific evidence of their harm to bees and other pollinators. Its assessment will inform whether changes should be made to current EU restrictions and, indeed, whether they should be extended to cover all crops. Will the UK base its view on future regulation on the EFSA assessment? Or, since those restrictions were only introduced in the first place thanks to the EU, do the Government see that as an opportunity—as the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) does—for overturning the current ban?

I also want to mention the impact on farmers and the managed environment. The common agricultural policy is far from perfect, but it is a lifeline for British farmers—around 55% of their income comes from EU subsidies. Britain’s lack of food self-sufficiency, which now stands at 61%, makes us overexposed and vulnerable to Brexit. As most experts are agreed that prices for imported food are likely to rise, we will have real difficulties offsetting that with more, much needed British-grown food, given how reliant the sector is on free movement of labour from within the EU and on migrant labour—I think I am right to say that 38% of workers in the food and farming sector come from outside the UK, and their situation is much in doubt in a post-Brexit scenario.

The leave campaign promised that a post-Brexit UK Government would be more generous to farmers, but we know that the UK lobbied for cuts to CAP support. We also know that the UK had the option of transferring 15% spending to pillar two for rural development, but only opted for 12.5% modulation, showing worrying signs about the possible direction of travel.

There are already too many examples of the Government not meeting EU requirements. As I have said, they had to be taken to court by ClientEarth for breaching EU clean air laws, as well as by the World Wide Fund for Nature and the Angling Trust over their failure to protect our rivers, lakes and seas from toxic pollution. The water framework directive required “good” ecological status by 2015 in all water bodies, but only 19% of those bodies currently comply. Some beaches
have been de-designated by the Government so that they do not have to warn swimmers about poor water quality or test the waters.

Finally, some people were worried that by staying in the EU we would end up as a signatory to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, and that our hard-won environmental, food safety and animal welfare standards could be compromised as a result. For example, the EU does not allow hormone-pumped meat, but the US does. What happens now? Just when the EU looks as if it will resist TTIP—signals from France and Germany suggest that it will do so in its current form—will Brexit mean that the UK Government end up negotiating a bilateral trade deal with the US? If so, will our much weaker bargaining position mean that we cede ground on those important standards? Rather than “taking back control”, bilateral negotiations with the US could leave us with even less control. With so many unanswered questions, and faced with losing EU protections, Ministers need to assure us that Brexit will not mean environmental degradation and pollution spiralling out of control.

3.12 pm

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. As well as having a fantastically named constituency—it is much easier to remember than Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk—the new hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) did herself proud and stood tall for Tooting today. There were so many Labour MPs on the Benches around her that I wondered whether she was going to make a bid for her party’s leadership.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig)—the other half, as he claims, of Team Callum. He failed to mention that he calls himself Callum 2.0. He is taller and has more hair, but anyone who can see his shoes knows that there are clearly some flaws in the design.

Callum McCaig: We need a 3.0.

Calum Kerr: We do, absolutely.

This has been an excellent debate—it is a shame that we did not have more such debates prior to the referendum. SNP Members did everything in our power to promote the case for the UK remaining in the European Union, and a key part of that was about keeping the protections that EU legislation has brought in the workplace, and on human rights and the environment. Unfortunately, those issues were too often brushed aside in the fierce political contest that we experienced during the referendum. Indeed, as we have heard, the environment scarcely featured in the debate about Britain’s membership of the EU.

The environmental protections that we have enjoyed in this country for decades, which cover areas such as air and water quality, emissions, waste, chemical regulation, and habitat protection, are all underpinned by EU legislation. Britain’s membership of the European Union has had an extremely positive effect on the quality of Britain’s beaches, our water and rivers, and on the air that we breathe. It has underpinned protection for many of our rarest birds, plants and animals, and their habitats. Like so many other questions on the detail of Brexit, the question of how we will continue to protect those precious assets needs a coherent answer.

Whenever we look at an issue in more detail, the value of European collaboration becomes clear. As the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) told the country just days after encouraging us to vote to leave:

“There will still be intense and intensifying European cooperation and partnership in a huge number of fields: the arts, the sciences, the universities, and on improving the environment.”

It is not clear how that picture of intensifying European co-operation squares with the Home Secretary’s statement yesterday that “Brexit means Brexit”.

On matters that stretch across a range of different fields that are vital to our prosperity and wellbeing, there has been little more than evasion and confusion from the Government thus far. That is why Ministers must do everything in their power to clarify how they will take forward the protection of the UK’s environment in this new political situation. There is so much about the EU that we do not want to abandon. For example, as part of my other brief, I have noticed in meetings on the digital single market a strong view that it makes sense to continue to adhere to EU directives and projects, even though we have voluntarily given up the capacity to shape them.

It is worth considering how the country’s approach to the environment has been shaped since it joined the EU. As many hon. Members have said, in the 1980s Britain was known as the “dirty man of Europe” because of widespread pollution of air, land and water. There is a risk that Britain will end up regaining that reputation. Although the UK has sometimes willingly followed the drive for environmental standards, and even at times led the way, it has taken years to get this country to meet some standards that are considered the norm in Europe.

When we consider environmental protection, it is worth remembering that in addition to the inherent worth of our landscape and ecosystems, there are key economic benefits to protecting biodiversity. Our natural environment in Scotland contributes an estimated £21.5 billion to the Scottish economy. Scotland also provides the major part of the UK’s contribution to the EU-established Natura 2000 network of protected sites, with more than 15% of our land designated for a wealth of habitats and species.

During the campaign, we heard nothing from the Brexiteers about what a vote to leave would mean for the habitats directive, for the circular economy, with its need for long-term planning and investment, or for issues around water quality, on which the UK still has a lot of catching up to do. What we did hear was a deep and often ideologically driven opposition to “red tape”. That red tape includes measures that protect rare species and unique habitats, and that prevent companies from damaging the environment or using dangerous chemicals in their products. It is now time to put the rhetorical bluster about red tape behind us and move on to focusing on what the Government’s red lines will be as they undertake these negotiations. If their priorities are muddled, or if key protections are sacrificed for short-term gain, we could be living with the impact for generations. Wherever all the moving parts of this constitutional crisis end up, we must ensure that the UK continues on the right path. As a range of environmental groups
asserted before and after Brexit, co-operation and collaboration within Europe and with the EU works, because we do not solve such problems in isolation. My nation, Scotland, understands that, but does this House and do this Government also understand?

3.19 pm

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): When considering this question, and in respect of investor confidence, my concerns are as follows. Investment in oil and gas renewables, or any energy or environmental project or initiative, relies on, among other things, stable legislation. Investors must be able to rely on the conditions under which they are prepared to invest lasting for, preferably, the duration of that project or initiative. That has not been the case with this Government and previous Governments.

There have been about 18 legislative changes in the oil and gas sector in the past 15 years. Allied to that, there has been the withdrawal from green initiatives such as the zero-carbon home policy. The green deal home improvement fund was abolished. Solar subsidies have been cut and the onshore wind farm subsidy has been removed. The door has been opened to fracking and a cap for biomass fuel subsidy has been introduced. The UK Green Investment Bank has been privatised, the green tax target on renewable energy investment has been abandoned and green car incentives have been cut. Particularly significant for me, as I worked on one of the projects, was the cancelling of the competition for carbon capture and storage.

Stewart McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): My hon. Friend is illustrating the sorry place the Government have now taken the country. It is no longer Britannia rules the waves: it is Britannia waives the rules.

Philip Boswell: That is an excellent point well made by my hon. Friend.

The legislative changes in that short list can do nothing but discourage investors from investing in new energy production. The cancellation of the £1 billion carbon capture and storage competition initiative set out in the 2015 autumn statement will make it almost impossible for the UK to meet its climate change targets.

Calum Kerr: My hon. Friend highlights one reason why there is concern among Opposition Members. I have a degree of faith in the ministerial team who are sitting on the Treasury Bench. The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), and the Secretary of State understand the challenges. In this place, however, all too often the Treasury decides. Will my hon. Friend join me in pushing for a member of the ministerial team in the Chamber to become Chancellor?

Philip Boswell: I thank my hon. Friend for his commendable comments. I agree with him wholeheartedly.

Matthew Bell, the chief executive of the Committee on Climate Change, said:

“If you don’t have CCS, then you really need to virtually completely decarbonise your transport sector and completely decarbonise your heating sectors, in order to deliver on the 2050 ambition.”

Since both these sectors seriously lag behind in the decarbonisation of energy production, this seems extremely unlikely, to say the least. The underlying message of the changes is that the cost of subsidising renewable energy has been underestimated by the Government. That has led to the Treasury’s withdrawal of the green deals for consumers, housebuilders and energy investors alike. The Government have instead put all their eggs in the dual basket of fracking and nuclear energy, neither of which looks to be progressing very smoothly, and that makes achieving the UK’s mandatory climate change targets highly unlikely. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig) and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), who is no longer in the Chamber, touched on the problems of Hinkley C. As anyone can see, this history of successive short-termist UK Governments continuously moving the legislative goalposts can only undermine investor confidence. Brexit will only serve to exacerbate that problem further, which was a point well made by the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), who is no longer in the Chamber.

On energy security, last year I was a member of the European Energy Market Design Committee. The Committee was at a very early stage of engagement, but the potential for cross-European energy sharing among EU members via interconnectors and the like was striking. I wonder if that Committee will even sit again this year, given Brexit. It should be obvious to all that an efficient interconnector network and shared energy design across Europe would benefit all. When the wind is blowing in Scotland, as it invariably does, the energy that is generated can be used elsewhere. If there is no wind, but the sun is shining in Spain, we can share that mutual benefit. I sincerely hope the Committee does meet again, but we have just made things much harder for ourselves as we try to co-ordinate European efficient energy supply from without the EU.

I should say at this point that Scotland has no intention of suffering the fallout from Brexit, the ramifications of which are still to be understood. As my hon. Friends the Members for Aberdeen South and for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr) both pointed out, we are staying in Europe.

I, like most sensible politicians, turn to independent experts for opinions and answers to questions about complex matters such as the natural environment. My points about the circular economy have been well made by other Members, so I will skip on to my next point.

The Institution of Environmental Sciences is currently conducting a survey of its members, in which it asks:

“What impact do you think the UK’s decision to leave the EU will have on environmental protection?”

An overwhelming 81% of highly educated, experienced environmental professionals consider that

“Without binding EU law, it is likely environmental regulations will be weakened or scrapped in the UK.”

A pre-EU referendum survey of members of the Institution of Environmental Sciences showed that 68% were in support of the UK remaining in the EU. The UK has been disproportionately successful in securing funding for research projects in the environmental sciences and other sectors due to the strength of our science base. Under the seventh framework programme, FP7, which ran from 2007 to 2013, €1,704 million was spent on
projects falling under the environment theme. Of the 4,055 projects funded under the FP7 environment theme, according to the Community Research and Development Information Services, 603 were based in the UK, which made us second only to Germany, with 645.

Kerry McCarthy: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point about the contribution of EU funding to research. I recently visited the Plymouth Marine Laboratory. While I was there, it was announced that it would receive a significant six-figure sum from Europe to fund some of its research, but obviously it is now very worried about what Brexit will mean. I also went to Harper Adams agricultural University, which does amazing work with lasers, drones and all sorts of hi-tech research. Again, that is dependent on EU funding to a large extent.

Philip Boswell: I completely agree with the hon. Lady and share her concerns about funding when Britain leaves the EU. Brexit does not bode well for the future of positive environmental projects in the UK.

I want to ask a number of questions of the Minister and to make a final point. First, Scotland has an incredible opportunity to be a world leader in a range of renewable technologies that are a vital part of our energy supply in the UK. They help the environment and create jobs in communities across Scotland. What steps will the Secretary of State and her Government take to ensure that Scotland remains at the forefront of renewable and offshore industries?

Secondly, the recent vote to leave the EU has plunged the UK’s energy sector into further uncertainty. The SNP calls on the UK Government to halt their damaging programme of austerity and to inject the economy with the investment necessary to stimulate growth and create a healthy environment for investors and consumers alike. What will the Government do to protect businesses and consumers from the Brexit fallout?

Thirdly, the SNP believes that enhancing energy efficiency in homes throughout the UK can provide valuable benefits to individual consumers, from improvements to quality of life to reducing fuel poverty, which is a key issue that has not been touched on enough today. The energy efficiency of homes should be a top priority so, in that respect, what does the Secretary of State intend to do to reduce fuel poverty? Fourthly, what do she and her Government intend to do so that we will hit our climate change targets and keep the lights on?

Renewable energy storage and efficiency are key to the future of UK energy. More needs to be done on non-intermittent green energy, so I urge the Secretary of State to invest in pumped storage, particularly at Cruachan and Coire Glas in Scotland.

3.29 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We have had an important and revealing debate—revealing because it has confirmed our worst fears: that the Government called a referendum without first carrying out an analysis of what might happen should the electorate opt to leave the EU. It can be called nothing but reckless to enter upon a process without first carrying out a risk assessment. The analysis should have come first, as we have heard from many hon. Members in this debate.

This has been an excellent debate, however, with a deep understanding of all the impacts of leaving the EU. The shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), talked about the impact on climate change and the impact it is already having on some of the poorest people in our communities—2.83 million households are already in fuel poverty and, as we have heard, fuel bills are rising. We also heard an excellent speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), the outstanding Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, highlighting many of the protections at risk if we leave the EU, along with the advances of the past 40 years—40 years of marriage summed up in two years of divorce. In particular, she highlighted the issues of air quality, water management, waste and, of course, biodiversity protection.

We were privileged to hear today the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Swanage (Philip Boswell). It was a tour de force. She brings to the House the energy with which she served her patients in accident and emergency and her community, and we are honoured to have her in the House. I know that she will be an excellent advocate for her constituents for many years to come. We also heard excellent speeches from my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), who has been a strong campaigner on air quality and emissions, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who said many of the things I wanted to bring up. She brings great expertise to the House. We heard from other hon. Members across the House concerns about the impact of leaving the EU.

It was the Government’s determination that we should have a referendum, but first the impact of leaving should have been analysed—clearly, remaining would have resulted in normal policy processes. They could have then shared the outcomes with the electorate. We have heard today about the many risks. Not only should the impact assessment have taken place, but there should have been an understanding of the volume and depth of our regulatory ties with the EU and some scenario planning for what environmental protections the Government would prioritise should the pound plummet, as it is at the moment.

For instance, a member of the public asked me whether pillar 2 of the common agricultural policy would be implemented in full or whether the Government would scale back on the £563 million currently received back from the EU, and whether they would meet their match-funding obligations. We need to know the detail. How will farmers maintain a competitive edge while addressing conservation challenges and ensuring sustainable protections? We have not heard from the Government how much legislation is tied up with the EU. The shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), talked about how much of our environmental protections originate from Brussels, but what is the real figure and how integrated are we? We have not heard from them how much resource is needed to carry out detailed analysis of the impact of leaving the EU in the context of the cut to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs of 57% by 2020. Neither have we heard what amount of resources would be necessary to renegotiate each regulation, if that is the path we go down. The hon. Member for Poole (Mr Symes) suggested an alternative way forward.
How will we—or will we not—engage with the EU in the future on so many of these important environmental issues? How will we regulate, police and enforce the new UK-based law systems as it affects the environment in respect of what currently occurs in the EU courts? What will be the mechanisms of the future? We still do not know. We have not heard about the costs of the necessary work and we have not heard even whether the people with the right skill sets are present in the Department at this time. We have not heard how the fall of the pound, wiping millions off the value of our economy, will impact on environmental projects and research. Neither have we seen any analysis of the global impacts. Perhaps the Government plan is simply to buy the whole package off Europe, but at what price? Will the cost be the same as for existing EU nations or will we pay more for those benefits? These are questions that must be answered.

Many Labour Members are concerned about the global impacts on the environment because we believe that protecting our climate and environment is one of the most important functions of Government. We are already witnessing a massive impact of decades of neglect. We see floods and famine, disease and drought, climate change and conflict, and we see population migration as a result, the impact of which can be felt across the globe, including on us here in the UK. The environment does not respect national borders. From the macro level to the micro level in respect of the loss of habitats and species, the Government have a weighty responsibility to drive forward a programme of responsible stewardship.

In 2010, the UK led the world on issues such as climate change and improving the environment. Opposition Members are proud of that, even while we acknowledge that there was so much more to do. As we have heard today, when it comes to dealing with climate change issues, we have slipped out of the top 10 nations and are now ranked 13th in the world—not the way in which we want to progress on these issues as we move forward. The UK led the EU as a major player on the global stage for environmental protections. We want to ensure that we maintain a strong voice as we move forward, rebalancing our natural environment. The strength of our influence, however, is now unclear. We will no longer be at the EU table, pressing the EU to go further.

Given that we have a falling and failing economy, I must press the Minister to commit to legislate to secure protection on all environmental measures that we are currently obliged to meet in the EU. How will he advance them, and how will he regulate to ensure enforcement of them? As we look back at our history, we do not want to become known as “the dirty man of Europe”; we want to make real advances on where we are today. Labour is clear: the Government must act urgently to replace these vital environmental protections in full.

On the most simple level, I want the Minister to clarify whether we will see—before the summer recess as the Government committed to provide—the two long-awaited 25-year plans for food and farming and the plans for the environment, or are these now placed in the box marked, “We did not have a leave plan, so we do not know what on earth we are going to do”? Will the Minister please provide some clarification today?

Labour wants to ensure that external pressures still lean on this Government. On air quality, we saw the World Health Organisation report released earlier today. Air quality is a public health issue; it impacts on people’s respiratory functions. As someone who worked in respiratory medicine for 20 years, I understand the impact that bad air can have. We have heard today how up to 50,000 people’s lives are ended prematurely as a result of the quality of air in our country. Yes, people are dying prematurely.

We need to know what the Government are going to do about the urgent question of air quality. It is already a serious issue in my own city of York, where people are dying prematurely, and I am aware of plans for developments that will worsen the air quality in our city. There are questions that we must address, from the question of how many trees we will plant to the question of how we will protect the provisions of important directives, to which so many of my colleagues have referred today. We want answers to those questions. The Government must set out their strategy for the future, which they failed to do before the EU referendum to take account of a possible leave vote.

Perhaps the Minister will enlighten us today. Will he commit himself to continuing to apply the precautionary principle when scientific data are not complete, or will he agree with the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and adopt the much weaker United States risk-based approach, which imposes limits on the way in which pesticides, genetically modified crops and food management are dealt with, so that profit is often placed ahead of environmental protections? We have a right to know the answer, as do the people of our country.

If there were time, I would raise many more of our concerns about the Government’s environmental protections. Ours is a fragile and complex environment. Over the last decades, we have worked diligently with our European friends and neighbours to rebalance our environment and climate, and today the Government should have made clear how they will advance the progress that has been made so far. We cannot afford further delay. We believe that the Government must, as a matter of urgency, replicate the multitude of EU directives in UK law. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how he will secure our environment for the years to come.

3.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): Let me begin by paying a huge tribute to the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for an extraordinary maiden speech. It contained five elements that, I think, encapsulated the heart of this debate. First, there was her extraordinary sense of history, and the commitment that she showed in talking about Nye Bevan and the Clean Air Act 1956. Secondly, there was her sense of responsibility, and of the scale of the challenge that we face. Thirdly, there were her energy and optimism. Fourthly, there was her sense of place: she said she thought people who said that Tooting was becoming a fantastic place were missing the fact that—as she felt—it had been a fantastic place all her life. Finally, there was her sense of the importance of humans in the history of the landscape, whether she was talking about the lido at Tooting or about her own community and family.
In general, through her rhetoric, through her language and through her love of this place, the hon. Lady—as the Member of Parliament who has entered the House at the moment when we are leaving the European Union—gave us a real reason to be optimistic about Parliament and the sovereignty of Parliament. The five elements that she contributed represent exactly what we hope to bring to the British environment in the future.

An enormous number of questions have been asked today. The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), asked the Government to respond to specific queries on—I think—nine separate occasions. I counted 35 questions posed by him, and a further 117 posed by other Members. I have approximately nine minutes in which to answer those questions, and, with the House’s permission, I will therefore focus on the natural environment rather than on energy issues, with apologies to the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig)—Callum senior. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell), who initiated an extremely erudite discussion of many energy-related issues, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), who drew attention to a number of ways in which domestic legislation underpinned UK energy policy, and explained that some of the references to the European Union were a little misleading.

I shall not be able to engage as fully as I would like with the extraordinary speech made by the hon. Member for Brent North (McCarthy), although it was read out, particularly by my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) and the Secretary of State. That is partly, as the Secretary of State said, because of the very real strengths that exist in this country. As Members on both sides pointed out, we derive immense positives from our membership of the EU, and they have been concisely listed. The hon. Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), for Bristol East and for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr) laid out the powerful progress made over the past 42 years in air and water quality, and that is driven by EU law and EU financial assistance, and by the structures of the EU that protected our landscape. As the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) pointed out, it is important for our international industry to ensure we have uniform standards so there is not a race to the bottom. We cannot simply think about this island as we have uniform standards so there is not a race to the bottom. People will continue to be frustrated by bureaucracy and they will continue to have to respond to procurement structures brought into place by 27 member states have in the past made it difficult to respond to recent evidence. Members raised the question of inspections and fines as well, and, again, those rigid inspection regimes have, at their worst, sometimes discredited the very environmental regulations we wish to protect. Finally, as my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) pointed out, there are perverse consequences of parts of the CAP for the environmental conditions we value so much.

In essence, four main types of point were made in this debate and they form the structure of an answer. First, the importance of being deeply optimistic about Britain’s future outside the EU was pointed out, particularly by my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) and the Secretary of State. That is partly, as the Secretary of State said, because of the very real strengths that exist in this country. As Members on both sides pointed out, we derive immense positives from our membership of the EU, and they have been concisely listed. The hon. Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), for Bristol East and for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr) laid out the powerful progress made over the past 42 years in air and water quality, and that is driven by EU law and EU financial assistance, and by the structures of the EU that protected our landscape. As the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) pointed out, it is important for our international industry to ensure we have uniform standards so there is not a race to the bottom. We cannot simply think about this island as we have uniform standards so there is not a race to the bottom. People will continue to be frustrated by bureaucracy and they will continue to have to respond to procurement structures brought into place by 27 member states have in the past made it difficult to respond to recent evidence. Members raised the question of inspections and fines as well, and, again, those rigid inspection regimes have, at their worst, sometimes discredited the very environmental regulations we wish to protect. Finally, as my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) pointed out, there are perverse consequences of parts of the CAP for the environmental conditions we value so much.

The principles on which we now need to move forward were laid out very powerfully by this House, and by the hon. Member for Bristol East in her initial intervention, and they seem to me to be sixfold. They are the principles of realism, of humility, of honesty about conflict, of being honest with the public, of confidence and of identity. I shall expand briefly on those principles. First, on realism, we have to acknowledge that leaving the European Union will not mean leaving government behind. People will continue to be frustrated by bureaucracy and they will continue to have to respond to procurement regulations. We will continue to have to operate in an international environment. We will have to make compromises.

On the principle of humility, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane rightly pointed out that not everyone in this country is always interested in the environment. We have to be realistic about our power and about our capacity as a Government to respond. On the principle of honesty about conflict, land remains a deeply conflicted issue. We must not imagine that simply leaving the European Union will overcome the serious conflicts between different land uses in our constituencies. There are conflicts between people’s desire to build housing, people’s desire to create renewable energy, people’s desire to produce productive food and people’s desire to protect the species and habitats that we value so much.
The principles of confidence and identity are perhaps the most important of all. The decision in the referendum was made by one of the most well educated, well travelled populations in the most mature democracy on Earth, and we need to ensure that we recognise the legitimacy of that democratic choice. We need to put our full energy and optimism behind it. We need to understand, in responding to this, that the British identity—this extends to England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—is based fundamentally on our land.

In moving forward, we need to reassure people. As the Secretary of State pointed out, we need to play a full role in all our international conferences. We need to ensure, for example, that we play a responsible and reliable international role in the forthcoming conferences on biodiversity and on the convention on international trade in endangered species—CITES. We could also be far more imaginative.

Geraint Davies: Does the Minister accept that there is still a case for a second referendum on the exit package and the precise terms of our leaving the EU? We have only agreed to leave in principle; people have not yet seen what is in the can.

Rory Stewart: Absolutely not. I disagree strongly with that intervention. However, the hon. Gentleman has shown the optimism we need through his focus on technology, just as the hon. Member for Bristol East has shown the optimism we need through his focus on markets in China and India. There is so much potential out there in the landscape and environment, and their extraordinary natural scientists. We have a rich civil society with structures in place. We have incredible new Members of Parliament, such as the hon. Member for Tooting, bringing their energy and optimism to this House. If we can bring all that together, we can prove in the future, as we have proved over the last millennium, that the British landscape and environment, and their extraordinary combination of productive food and nature, can remain at the heart of our national identity for ever.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 229, Noes 278.

Division No. 42] [3.54 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deirdre
Brown, Alan
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Cragg, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Durkan, Mark
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glinn, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodman, Helen
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kyle, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Law, Chris
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lucas, Caroline
Maclaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCain, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McCarron, Natalie
McGovern, Alison
Mclnnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
Meaule, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
O’Hara, Brenda
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**EU Referendum: Energy and Environment**

**12 JULY 2016**

**EU Referendum: Energy and Environment**
SATs Results

4.7 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House believes that every child deserves an excellent education which enables them to grow and thrive; notes that the Government has published figures showing that a lower proportion of children were meeting the expected standard at the end of Key Stage 2 overall in 2016 than in 2015; further notes that, as a result, in 2016 47% of children will be told that they have not reached the expected standard in at least one of their SATs papers; regrets that the Secretary of State for Education has pushed ahead with chaotic and confusing reforms which mean that thousands of children will be unnecessarily labelled as failures, and that the Secretary of State is steadily losing the confidence of teachers; and calls on the Government urgently to review primary assessment and the 2016 SATs results and to clarify that these will not be used for measuring and judging school performance.

The 2016 key stage 2 standard assessment tests, which assess children in reading, writing, spelling, grammar, punctuation and maths, are the first to assess the new primary national curriculum, which was introduced in 2014. The Government claim that they have raised expectations for pupils at the end of key stage 2, but those at the chalk-face—primary school teachers and school leaders—say that the expected standard for SATs has been set at a level that is beyond the reach of the majority of children.

Our children are being set up to fail. Almost half of England’s 11-year-olds will now go on to secondary school, having been told by this Government that they are failures. However, the real failures are this Government, particularly the current Secretary of State for Education who pushed ahead with this flawed system despite all the warnings from the education profession that the primary assessment system was not fit for purpose.

Under this Government, children who fail to meet the totally unrealistic expected target at the end of key stage 2—47% of children—will be required to resit these tests in future. School leaders were told yesterday that the catch-up funding for secondary schools will not increase despite the rise in the number of pupils deemed to be below the expected standard. For these pupils, the first year at big school—and all the excitement and anticipation that it should bring—will instead become an anxious replay of drilling for tests in English and maths, which they sat in primary school. I can only imagine the impact on those young lives—to have to go through it all again, to feel a failure, to see their friends getting on when they should be looking ahead to new challenges and new opportunities.

I remember being told that I would never amount to anything, but look at me now. I want—teachers want—every child to know that they are amazing. I want an education system that helps every child realise their full potential.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The hon. Lady may remember that under the last Labour Government we had such a system. It was fantastic. Every child was told that they were succeeding. It was just that when we looked at the international league tables, we went down, down and down. We had grade inflation. Whatever her critique of SATs results this year, does she not agree that we must have high standards and we must maintain those standards over time; otherwise...
we will go back to those days under Labour when we let down the future of young people by pretending that they were successful when, in fact, they were not?

Angela Rayner: I remember that under Labour we had Sure Start, we had Every Child Matters, we had new schools, we had teachers in the profession, we had people and children feeling that they were happy. At present we have teachers taking unprecedented industrial action and leaving the profession at record rates, so I take no lectures from those on the Government Benches regarding the current situation.

The Opposition recognise that ongoing assessment and consistent testing in schools is extremely important to help teachers and parents support and provide new challenges for all children. Such tests can identify and close any gaps in knowledge so that all pupils can do well. But a proper assessment regime needs consistency and needs to be understood by all.

The Government have utterly failed to deliver on this. The current SATs tests go too far. The Secretary of State has chopped and changed too much. She has caused disruption and chaos in our schools and extra bureaucracy for our teachers. The key stage 2 assessments have been an unmitigated disaster and a nightmare for thousands of children, ending in disappointment and prolonged uncertainty. They also have serious consequences for thousands of schools because of the way this Government use them as part of the school accountability system.

KS2 SATs are used to rank schools in league tables. They are scrutinised by the Department for Education and regional schools commissioners, who form judgments on schools’ performance. Ofsted uses SATs results when forming its inspection judgments, and parents take them into account when choosing their children’s school. Schools’ reputations are heavily dependent on how their pupils perform in these tests.

The National Association of Head Teachers asked the Secretary of State not to publish the data, as she herself has conceded that it is not to be compared with that for previous years. The NAHT general secretary, Russell Hobby, said:

“Given the changes to SATs this year, and the mistakes we’ve seen, it is hard see how valuable this data will be to parents who want to understand how well a school is performing year on year or compared to other schools. But the government does love a league table, regardless of how accurate it may be.”

Worryingly, the schools commissioners are already using the provisional results from these tests to identify those schools to which they can apply their extensive legal powers to force them into academy status on the spurious grounds that they are failing, coasting or underperforming.

Does all this remind us of anything—children who are judged failures at an early age, being separated from their primary school classmates; schools which are being wrongly condemned as second class? That sounds to me like the dark days of the 11-plus, with children branded failures before they have even reached their teens and separated from their classmates, with all the stigma that that can bring. Many adults today still recount the lasting effects that that had on them.

Angela Rayner: I made it quite clear in my opening remarks that the Opposition recognise the need for testing, but it is the chaotic way in which the Secretary of State has brought in the new key stage 2 SATs that is damaging and that potentially makes people feel a failure. Given what the hon. Gentleman has just said, I am sure he recognises that the 11-plus and 12-plus caused uncertainty and that feeling of failure. I remember how I felt when I was branded a failure, and these things do not help our young people today.

The Government seem hellbent on bringing back the 11-plus through the back door. They can deny that, but the evidence is right in front of us: children are being selected on the basis of muddle-headed tests into two separate groups—winners and losers, successes and failures—and their primary schools are being branded in exactly the same way. It is the 11-plus by any other name.

The tests do not give a rounded picture of the work of individual pupils or their schools. I could not put things any better than Mrs Jane Grecic, the headteacher of Lansbury Bridge School in St Helen’s, who wrote to one of her 11-year-old pupils, Ben, about his SATs results.

Ben is autistic, and Mrs Grecic congratulated one of her 11-year-old pupils, Ben, about his SATs results. Ben is autistic, and Mrs Grecic congratulated him on his fabulous progress, writing:

“these tests only measure a bit of you and your abilities... Ben is made up of many other skills and talents that we at Lansbury Bridge see and measure in other ways... These tests do not measure... Your artistic talents... Your ability to work in a team... Your growing independence... Your kindness... Your ability to express your opinion... Your abilities in sport... Your ability to make and keep friends... Your ability to discuss and evaluate your own progress... Your design and building talents... Your musical ability”

This fine headteacher concludes:

“we are so pleased that all of these different talents and abilities make you the special person you are and these are all of the things we measure to reassure us that you are always making progress and continuing to develop as a lovely bright young man. Well done Ben, we are very proud of you.”

I am sure the whole House will join me in congratulating young Ben on his development at the tender age of 11 and, indeed, his headteacher, on showing in very real, human terms how these test results should in no way make a child feel they are not developing well.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a persuasive case. Does she agree that we should be encouraging children and giving them confidence, particularly in areas such as mine, where there are high levels of deprivation, and where children are told by many people that they cannot achieve or go far in life? These things add to that, and we should be encouraging our children and giving them confidence, not discouraging them.

Angela Rayner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why we have to heed the concerns of the professionals. It is a real tragedy when we set children up to fail. The Government need to work with the profession to make sure this year’s mistakes are not repeated and to build a system that works better for
children, parents and schools. These results do not reflect the dedication of teachers and the many extra hours they have worked to ensure that all children can fulfil their potential, despite the turmoil caused by the Secretary of State's chaotic and confusing reforms.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): Is the shadow Secretary of State aware of the real danger of children leaving primary school and heading to secondary school without adequate maths and English? Once they have done that, there is only a one in nine chance they will cover the ground necessary for them to develop into proper adults. Is that not a serious matter, and should it not at least be addressed through some form of knowledge about outcomes?

Angela Rayner: I am only too aware of that, because I failed my GCSEs—I did not get grades A to C. We had a well-attended Westminster Hall debate about early years intervention and it is important that we put the structures in place to help children, not make them feel like failures through our own failures.

These SATs undermine the morale of our dedicated primary teachers, who have battled against the odds to prepare children for tests they knew were inappropriate while trying to protect them from their worst consequences. They could result in thousands more schools being forced to become academies. They do not reflect the hard work of children with special educational needs or those for whom English is an additional language. These tests are designed to measure what children cannot do, not what they can do. Nor do they measure the many ways in which our children learn to develop and succeed every day of their young lives.

The impact of these SATs on children is best illustrated by their parents. Rachel McCollin from Birmingham says:

“My son is tired, stressed and paranoid that he's going to fail—I can’t wait for this week to be over.”

Katharine Lee from Bath says:

“My son hardly slept on Sunday night and was a nervous wreck on Monday morning, despite us telling him that these tests are not the be-all and end-all. It's way too much pressure at 11.”

We have already forced the Government into a U-turn on forced academisation, but they are using these results to compel even more academisation through the back door. It is hardly surprising that teachers and school leaders have lost confidence in the Secretary of State and her education policies. Guidance arrived late and changed frequently. Test papers were leaked and the design of tests was poor. Preparation for the SATs had a negative impact on children's access to a broad and balanced curriculum. Ninety per cent of teachers thought that this year’s changes had had a negative impact on children’s experience at school. Teachers spoke of demoralisation, demotivation, and physical and mental distress. This is a damning indictment of the Secretary of State’s performance. She has been entrusted with the future of our children and the future of our country, and she has failed; we do not need any more to see that.

4.22 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Nicky Morgan): I wanted to give the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) the benefit of the doubt, because she has not been shadow Secretary of State for Education for very long and I can sense her passion for the subject, in terms of her own experiences in education and her family. However, her speech captured everything that is wrong with the Labour party at the moment: mad conspiracy theories, deferring to the unions, and zero answers to the problems facing this country. This is about young people who were let down by a Labour Government who consistently sold them short in terms of their life chances.

The hon. Lady was wrong on all counts—wrong on tests, wrong on selection, and wrong on giving young people the best start in life. Nothing—nothing at all—is more important than making sure that young people master the basics of the three R’s, and master them early. If they do not, they face a struggle for the rest of their lives and are denied the opportunity to realise their full potential. That is why making sure that every child in this country has a good grasp of literacy and numeracy is a matter of social justice.

Graham Stuart: Does my right hon. Friend agree that what is particularly sad is that Labour Members appear to think it is more important to let children think that they are ready for secondary school than actually to ensure that they are?

Nicky Morgan: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, a former Chair of the Education Committee. He is absolutely right that Labour Members appear to want to sell young people short, rather than being clear with them about the standards that are needed to compete not just with the best in this country, but with the best in the world.

When this Government came to office in 2010, too many young people entering secondary school were not able to read, write or add up well enough. England’s pupils were far behind their peers in top-performing countries right across the globe. International test after international test showed other nations surging ahead while England’s performance stagnated. In fact, the OECD identified England as one of the few countries in which the basic skills of school leavers were no better than those of their grandparents’ generation. To me, that is nothing short of a scandal, and central to that scandal was that the curriculum being taught in many primary schools, and the tests that the pupils were taking, were not up to scratch.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My constituency has some spectacular primary schools and some outstanding secondary schools, but as I go around the schools in my constituency, I find that too many young people are let down at the secondary stage of their education. They come out of primary school with very good results, but slip back over their five years in secondary school. What is the Education Secretary going to do about standards in secondary education as well as in primary?

Nicky Morgan: I will not give the hon. Gentleman all the details that I could set out if we were having a broader debate about education, because that would risk straying off the subject of key stage 2 SATs. We are, however, reforming GCSEs, introducing the EBacc, looking at technical and professional education and increasing the number of young people over the age of 16 in apprenticeships. Last Friday we launched the
skills plan. I do not disagree that there are challenges at both stages of education. The chief inspector of Ofsted has identified those first three years at secondary school as a time when children, particularly bright children from disadvantaged backgrounds, slip backwards. To me, that is also a matter of social justice, and I think that the hon. Gentleman and I can find common cause on the need to tackle it.

The trouble with the attitude of the Labour party is that while it allowed Labour politicians to trumpet ever higher pass rates, the price was low standards that let down the young people trying to master these vital subjects.

Neil Carmichael: To reinforce the Secretary of State’s point, is she concerned by the observation of National Numeracy that 78% of this country’s adult population scarcely reach level 2 in maths? That is appalling and we must work with total devotion to put the situation right. The SATs under discussion are one tool in a toolbox that we must use.

Nicky Morgan: I agree entirely with the Chairman of the Education Committee. Numeracy and literacy are basic skills and building blocks—the Prime Minister has called them the ultimate vocational subjects. Everybody needs to have confidence in them. On post-16 funding, this Government have required those who do not have a grade C at GCSE English and maths to continue to take the subject. It is worth noting that 70% of key stage 2 pupils who took the new test last week achieved the expected standard in mathematics. They are to be congratulated on their hard work.

This Government refused to accept the status quo that let young people down. That was why, in consultation with experts from across the education sector, we introduced a new, world-class primary school curriculum. That curriculum raised the bar on what counts as a good enough standard in the three R’s so that children would leave primary school genuinely ready for success in their secondary studies.

To measure how schools and pupils were performing against the new curriculum, new tests were required. I know that some oppose testing, but they could not be more wrong. The hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne was challenged by my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) about what tests she would introduce, but she could not answer that question. I think we can agree that tests are a vital part of teaching because they allow teachers to know whether a pupil has understood key subjects, give parents confidence that their children are on track and allow schools to identify where extra support is needed.

These tests are not about holding children to account and they are not exams. The best schools try to make sure that taking SATs involves as little stress as possible. As one teacher said to me just last week, “The children had such a positive attitude towards the SATs, which definitely paid off.”

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows about teachers’ concerns on this issue. What is she doing to ensure that, next year, more than 53% of children in our primary schools meet the expected standards?

Nicky Morgan: I am of course aware of the concerns. I read emails and letters from teachers, and I have conversations with teachers at every school that I visit. Those concerns were inevitable, given that this was the first year. This was always going to be a challenging year, as is the case for the first year of any new tests. I say that as someone who took the new GCSEs in their first year, way back in the late 1980s. We have made moves to tackle the workload and we are, of course, listening to the feedback that teachers have given us this year as we think about the structure of the assessment frameworks for next year. We will continue to do that.

I talked about a positive attitude towards SATs because that is not unique. Polling from ComRes of 10 and 11-year-olds found that 62% of pupils either “don’t mind” or “enjoy” taking the tests. That is far more than the number who say that they “don’t like” or “hate” taking the tests.

As I said, I know that in the first year of these tests being rolled out, the administration was not as smooth as it could have been, and for that we have apologised. However, in the few cases where errors occurred, we took immediate action, ensuring that the overall roll-out of the new SATs was a success. Lower results do not represent a failure of our reforms. I have been very clear that it is not possible to compare this year’s results with last year’s. We have always been clear that because we not only introduced a new curriculum but raised the bar, results would be lower as the new curriculum is bedding in.

That brings into sharp relief the contrast between this Government and the Labour party. We want children to really understand the curriculum so that they can compete with the best in the world. We do not want to run the risk of them leaving school without the knowledge and skills that they need to succeed. The Labour party, in contrast, clearly appears quite happy for that to happen. Labour Members forget that it is not the children in schools in leafy areas with supportive parents who read to them every night who most need their primary curriculum to set them up for life. It is the ones who are not brought up with high aspirations and interested parents who need their teachers and schools to aim high for them, and that is what these tests and the new curriculum are about.

In fact, the results showed that schools have resoundingly risen to meet the higher bar: two thirds of pupils achieved the expected standard in reading; seven in 10 achieved it in mathematics; and almost three quarters achieved it in writing. Despite the doom-mongering from Labour Members, more than half of young people achieved the expected standard in all three subjects. That number will rise as schools and pupils experience more of the new curriculum.

What does this mean for children who did not meet the expected standard? It means one thing: secondary schools are now aware of that and are able to give those pupils the support that they need to catch up. It absolutely does not mean, and never has meant, that those children have somehow failed. The only people who have used these results to label children failures are the National Union of Teachers and now the Labour party. That is absolutely shameful.
Andrew Gwynne: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Nicky Morgan: No, I am not going to give way.

Let me also be clear about what this means for schools. Conservative Members believe that schools have to be held to account for the results that their pupils achieve. However, they need to be held to account fairly, which is why we are judging schools not just on the standards that they achieve, but on the progress that they make with every child, so that schools with challenging intakes get proper recognition for the achievement they are making by pushing their pupils to success. On top of that, in recognition of the fact that this is a transitional year, I have also announced that the proportion of schools judged to be below the floor when the new progress bar is set will be no more than one percentage point higher than last year. That progress bar will be released in September, and no school can be identified as being below the floor before then.

Having listened to the speech by the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne, I was struck by just how easily it could have been written by the NUT’s acting general secretary. It represented the final stage of the Labour party’s transformation into the parliamentary wing of the NUT.

Vernon Coaker: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Nicky Morgan: No, not at the moment.

It was noticeable last week—this is noticeable today—that there was a greater presence on the Labour Benches for an urgent question about the NUT strike than there was for the previous day’s Education questions.

Vernon Coaker: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Nicky Morgan: No, I am not going to give way at the moment.

In our March White Paper, we set out plans to tackle areas of entrenched educational underperformance. What we did not expect was that one of those areas of entrenched underperformance would be the NUT itself. Its readiness to use the word “failure” about children, and to oppose every reform that is designed to recognise and reward great teaching and to enable schools to tackle the not so good, is yet another example of the chronic underperformance by that union on behalf of its members. More importantly, it is a failure for the children with whom its members work.

We now see the same attitude from the Opposition. In my two years as Secretary of State for Education, I have seen the transformation of the Labour party’s attitude to our education reforms from the secret support of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) to the hedged bets of the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell). We now have the outright hostility of the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne to the raising of standards. I hope that the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) will forgive me for lacking the time to work out where she stood.

The Labour party has firmly chosen, as the motion indicates, to become the anti-standards party, devoid of ideas and determined to protect vested interests and union barons rather than putting children and parents first. It has gone from the party of education, education, education, to the party of low standards, low aspiration and low expectations.

I do not want to end this speech by focusing on the collapsing Labour party; I want to end it by saying thank you. Rather than doing down the achievements of schools, teachers and pupils, I want to celebrate them and commend their exceptional work.

Vernon Coaker: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The Secretary of State is not giving way, is she? No.

Nicky Morgan: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I say thank you to the teachers, who once again have risen to meet the challenge and to deliver for young people. I reiterate today that teaching is the most noble of professions. Last week’s achievements in helping young people to demonstrate their mastery of the basics is yet another example of why that is so. I urge the House to reject the motion.

4.36 pm

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): Sometimes in debates such as this, criticising the Government can be quite difficult. When the Secretary of State describes the debacle of SATs as a great success, however, criticising Government policy becomes relatively easy. It is like shooting fish in a barrel.

I start by referring to a headteacher in my constituency—headteacher of the largest primary school in the north-west; it is a standard, middle-class school—who put his pupils through SATs recently. He was so shocked by the outcome that he felt it necessary to write home to the pupils in the following terms. He told the children to look on the bright side, and he wrote:

“The only thing people will remember about the tests from 2016 was that they were one big mess! Your result will not stop you achieving really well at high school and going on to be a fabulous success in the future. Put whatever you got to the back of your mind and move on!”

He told the children:

“Fairness is always vitally important in whatever we do in life. Unfortunately, these tests were really not fair.”

This is a very experienced headteacher of a large primary school, in a standard, middle-class area, which has a record of success behind it. He said to the pupils:

“They were much harder than usual and this meant that you didn’t get the chance to show how much you have learned. There has been lots in the news about this in the past week and schools all over the country are feeling the same…I think we all feel a bit let down.”

He continued:

“You feel let down because you worked so hard and maybe you didn’t quite get what you deserved. Your teachers feel the same because they have tried everything in their power to help you achieve and they are frustrated because it hasn’t quite turned out as they would have wanted.”

He went on to say what a great experience it had been to have the children at the school and that, compared with everything they had enjoyed at school, “a few test scores mean very little, particularly when the test was unfair anyway.”
Graham Stuart: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman is as disappointed as I am that when we had inflation in standards—when we had the perception of success, but not the reality—headteachers such as the one he speaks about did not write letters home to parents. It would be good if, in response to that selling out, they had showed outrage similar to that which they showed at the early implementation of a new, higher standard.

John Pugh: I am sure that this headteacher would have done whatever was professionally necessary at the time. I am not sure that he was a headteacher at that time, so I cannot really comment for him. He concluded his letter to his pupils:

“We don’t need tests to tell us how great you all are.”

The worst thing about the letter is that it shows that there was a clear need to remove the feeling among those good, hard-working children that they had failed. I do not think that anyone here is against the summative assessment of primary school children’s progress. I do not think that any Labour Member said that. Nobody is against meaningful feedback or having a tool to establish a baseline for improvement. No one wants to go back to the days of total freedom where there were no reasonable expectations, but we must all—including the Government—be prepared to learn something. We must learn from places such as Finland, which has few tests like our SATs but which, as everybody knows, does very well. We must learn from experts and from teachers who have to implement what we impose. We need a sense—this is clearly lacking from the Secretary of State’s comments—of common enterprise between the teaching profession and the Government. I know that the NUT is the teaching profession, but the Secretary of State needs to incorporate some measure of support for what teachers have been trying to say to her.

We need a bit of humility, which perhaps I can illustrate by using the vexed issue of grammar—I took a look at the grammar sections of this year’s tests. I think that grammar has its place. It provides a recursive definition of a living language and, like a language, it evolves. I happen to think that grammar helps more in understanding foreign languages than our own, and I argue that the greatest orators in this place are not necessarily the greatest grammarians. If someone was stopped mid-sentence and asked what type of clause they were using, they might be in some difficulty. Most people have been speaking grammatically for most of their life with a fair amount of success—it is rather like Molière’s character Monsieur Jourdain, who found, with some surprise, that he had been talking prose all his life.

There may be value in trying to understand the rules that one unconsciously follows, and there is genuinely value and fun in a bit of clause analysis—I certainly enjoyed it when I was at school. However, it is arguable how far that benefits the users of language, and how much meta vocabulary one needs to acquire, particularly as there seems to be no particular consistency as to what vocabulary one ought to have, and there seems to be some opacity in what terminology one needs to pick up. Fronted adverbials certainly were not there in my day. I did Latin, preferring the imperfect to the past progressive. All these things are fairly arcane, esoteric stuff, and it is arguable how far you can go down that road without descending into the kind of pedantry that dismisses split infinitives or ending sentences with prepositions. But it is simply unarguable that imposing, in haste, a curriculum and test of limited value, with scanty preparation, and discouraging well intentioned pupils and teachers in the process, is rash. It is rash, and it requires some serious explanation and apology.

4.42 pm

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and to talk about SATs this year. I remember that when I chaired the Education Committee a number of years ago, we had the SATs fiasco under the previous Government. That was when a true mess was made of SATs. This year a new assessment has been brought in, and I can share with the House, having chaired the Committee—my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) is in that Chair now—that whenever new assessments are brought in, there is some level of volatility. We will not get everything right, and I would not try to claim that we necessarily have this year, but at first there is volatility and then, over time, outcomes improve.

The central question is, how are we going to raise standards? Well, actually, the first question is: are we doing a good enough job? That would have been a good question for the shadow Secretary of State to ask. Were we doing a good enough job in 2010? Are we today? Things are always partial, and it is always hard to get data that are entirely comparative, but the answer is that, in the context of what is happening around the world, it would appear that too many of the children in England are not given the requisite skills, capability and knowledge to flourish in secondary school, with lifelong negative impacts on them and their families.

That would appear to be the evidence, but we did not hear that from the shadow Secretary of State. Instead—I do not mean to be too harsh on one of her first outings—we had a rather incoherent if passionate denunciation of testing, because if we feed back the results of tests to people, some will be told that they are not at the required standard and others will be told that they are. The hon. Lady’s speech seemed to be an attack on that in principle, yet that passionate denunciation was married with a public statement that she and her party believe we should still have tests. I do not see how those two things can be put together. It seems an extraordinary conjunction. The shadow Secretary of State needs to think clearly: that is what education policy requires. It is not just a political fight in this House; what happens in schools has real-world effects on children. That was disappointing and it would be really good to hear what the Labour party thinks about tests.

The shadow Secretary of State’s strong, lurid language around failure and failing is unwelcome. We aspire to a high standard. Not everyone is going to reach it, but that is the nature of high standards. It does not mean that everybody else is worthless and it does not mean their learning is worthless. It does not mean that they have not done a good job or worked hard. None the less, do we not have to give people objective ideas about where they would ideally like to be, or do we throw that away because it might demoralise some? She appeared to contradict herself on two sides of the argument.
Neil Carmichael: It is a great pleasure to have an opportunity to comment on my predecessor’s observations. Does my hon. Friend agree that the tests are part of a wider mission to improve standards? They are linked to differences in the curriculum and to the attitude we have, which is to give young people aspiration and the tools to deliver on that aspiration. Does he agree that that is part of our complete determination to give young people more opportunity in life?

Graham Stuart: I agree with my hon. Friend. Although I defer to the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh), who made such a fine speech, I would have to say that I did not agree with him about his use of the split infinitive and would prefer it was not used in this House, orally or otherwise; but that is because I am a bit of a pedant in that respect. There is a genuine argument to be had.

The hon. Member for Southport rightly started to unpick some of that grammar. How practically useful is it? What exactly is it designed for? Is it excessive in its extent and application, compared with what is sought from it? Those are legitimate questions and perhaps we do need to row back. I do not know. I have not studied it and I would like to hear more. Focusing on those practicalities might be a much more useful dialogue. Instead, the shadow Secretary of State moved on from her two contradictory positions to a rather crazed assessment that this was like the 11-plus. The whole point of the 11-plus was to divide children and select them. I do not think that anyone can suggest that is what has happened with the SATs this year.

Vernon Coaker: To stop this becoming a sterile debate, let me say from the outset that I do not think there is anybody in this House who is in favour of not trying to improve standards in schools. I think there is also a consensus that testing is part of improving standards in schools, yes, I meet teachers concerned about the changes in the curriculum and the assessment and about the volatility. Members will remember the changes to the assessments and tests go through, and create, additional volatility. Members will remember the changes to the SATs tests this year. The hon. Gentleman has made that point, but we did not hear from the Secretary of State what she intends to do about those problems to put them right for next year.

Graham Stuart: As I said a few minutes ago, all new assessments and tests go through, and create, additional volatility. Members will remember the changes to the English GCSE. They were called a fiasco; I would call them a furore. The unions said they were a disaster and a disgrace, and the schools said it was nothing to do with them, but when they went to court they lost on every single count. It was a new test and it took time. The following year, with pretty much the same test, the schools that had done badly had learned how to do it better. They read the spec in a way that they had obviously failed to do previously, and other technical changes were made.

This is a new assessment. It is not a disaster. We need to unpick its components and look at them carefully to find out whether there is the right balance between raising standards, having high standards and not creating something that is negative in the way it is perceived by children and schools.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): This year, of course, it will be very difficult to embed the new assessment. Does my hon. Friend agree that the new curriculum assessment gives children a mastery of the subject before they move on? That is far preferable to them moving through the system without having that grasp of the subject.

Graham Stuart: I agree with my hon. Friend. If the answer to my first question—about whether we are doing a good enough job—is no, it is not because we have lazy teachers. Fundamentally, if we are not doing a good enough job or as good a job as our neighbours and competitors, we need to raise standards, and when that happens, there is going to be a shock to the system. That is partly because of the volatility and adjustment and partly because the system needs that shock. It needs to be told.

I sometimes clashed with the hon. Lady’s predecessor on the question of what simply raising the bar did to raise standards. It is a mixed answer, but I have seen standards in the system raised partly because the bar was raised and there was clarity about what was required. Whatever the difficulties—there are all sorts of issues and complexities, including academisation—and notwithstanding some of the downsides, we have fundamentally better schools now than we did six years ago, and that is partly because we have stated clearly what we want and asked schools to meet the challenge. I have absolute confidence that next year, as schools learn to adjust to the challenge and headteachers work out how better to use their people and their funds, including the pupil premium, more than 53% of children will meet the standards.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Going through change is difficult. Do the Government have a role to play in keeping our teachers with us, which is what I worry about most of all? Change is hard for the children and teachers, but our teachers are under unprecedented stress, and I worry for them. Do the Government not need to keep a close eye on that and listen to teachers at all times?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The whole House has a role to play and ought not simply to trumpet the negatives, as the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) did, in this early outing as an Opposition spokesperson. It might have been more devastating to be understated than to suggest that this was a return to the 11-plus, which it clearly is not. But there are issues about maintaining engagement with teachers.

People might think that the Secretary of State’s fairly vicious assault on the NUT was over the top, but, given my experience of the NUT, I do not think it was. The NUT opposes almost everything. It is tragic. All I can say by way of uplift is this: when I go to primary schools, yes, I meet teachers concerned about the changes in the curriculum and the assessment and about the speed, from their end of the telescope, so to speak, at which they feel the change is happening—they genuinely find it difficult and challenging—but I find them to be a lot more positive than their national representatives on the NUT. It is unfortunate that the NUT is so often seen as speaking for all our teachers. I do not think it does.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) is right that we need to keep teachers on board. We must recognise that the teacher is the most important person in the system. Teacher quality is the
key. The one thing I learned in five years chairing the Education Committee was that teacher quality was the most important thing. Leaders are important only insofar as they help to bring out the best in teachers. Teacher quality is transformational.

John Pugh: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Graham Stuart: I promised I would not be that long, but I have obviously broken my word—not for the first time.

John Pugh: What does the hon. Gentleman make of the example of Finland, which is very light on tests but very strong on teacher buy-in? What conclusions does he draw from its favourable ranking in the PISA table compared with us?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is right to lay down that challenge—though before mentioning Finland, he said he remained in favour of tests too. When a system moves to a certain level of excellence, as in Finland, and starts to recruit teachers from the top 30% of graduates in the country, and when 10 people are competing for each job—these are old data, admittedly—not only does it get people with high academic ability but it can select on empathy, enthusiasm and other skills as well, and then has a first-class workforce.

We are a much bigger country with different challenges, and we do not recruit our teaching workforce from the same pool as Finland. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman ever saw the work by McKinsey about how good systems keep getting better. It is a fairly basic thing when one hears it, but one has to hear it to realise it. Systems are different and require different interventions at different points in their development. I look forward to the day when we have such a self-confident, self-critical, self-improving education system that we can slowly cut down Ofsted and the accountability system and leave it to keep improving by itself. The reason why the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne, the hon. Member for Southport and my hon. Friends have not reached that point is that we do not yet have the confidence, but I hope that one day it will come.

I have one final point on the issue of children’s stress. It is important not to talk up lurid references to failure and it is important to say to schools generally that they should look at the schools where the children are not showing any stress. Does the system mean that all children have to be stressed? No, because we can find many instances where children are suffering no stress. They can be prepared for SATs without it feeling like some great ordeal coming down the road on which their whole future depends.

The message that the House should send—hopefully from all sides—is that schools should look at and learn from the schools that do not put stress on kids and use the SATs as an “assessment for learning”—call it what we like—rather than making them into an ordeal. Teachers and headteachers need to ensure that whatever the stress they are feeling—they are accountable for their results, so they should be feeling some—they do not pass it on to children. It is possible for that to happen; it does happen; it needs to happen everywhere.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Let me state from the outset that am a child of the ’70s when grammar purism was not much taught. I think the Secretary of State and I are of the same vintage—from 1972—so I am not going to be a grammar fascist or purist in this debate. We used to play in the sandpit in those days rather than learn the declensions of nouns.

I want to contribute to today’s debate because of a case raised with me over the weekend by a constituent. She is deputy headteacher of Christ the Saviour, a Church of England primary school that is outstanding in all four categories. This is not a Bash Street school gasworks comprehensive or anything like those sort of places. The deputy head, Katie Tramoni, is someone I was at school with. I have lived 44 years in Ealing, so I have spent a lot of time there, and both the schools I attended are in my constituency. I am now a mum, bringing up my own children in the borough.

As I say, Christ the Saviour is a well-regarded school and I was at school with Katie. This weekend, I went to the Acton carnival, and she literally grabbed me by the lapels and said, “Can you tell Nicky Morgan this from me?” When I saw this debate coming up, I thought, “Now is my opportunity.” Katie is worried about the floor standards of key stage 2. Like everyone else, I have read the headlines saying that almost half of 11-year-old primary pupils will not reach the required standard, but Katie’s issues are with the marking, so let me raise them directly.

Katie tells me that the KS2 reading paper was so poorly marked that 55 out of 86 papers—64%—had to be returned for re-marking. The quibbles sometimes seem very minor, but it costs the school £9 per paper if the complaint is not upheld. That does not seem to make sense economically, and the school is in fear of sending things back because of that £9 penalty. For the GPS paper—on grammar, punctuation and spelling—the complaint was that the marking scheme was exceptionally harsh. If, for example, a pupil inserts a semi-colon in the correct place in the sentence, but in too large a size so that it comes out larger than the letters, it is marked wrong. A zero mark is given, and there are many things like that. Katie said, “I know I go on and on. Don’t get me started on SATs report; let me know if you need more; I must dash.” It was at 7 o’clock this morning that I noticed this debate was on.

The point has been made by Government Members that we are anti-testing, but that is not the case. We presided over tests for all those years in power. As the Secretary of State pointed out, it was Tony Blair’s mantra that his top three priorities were “education, education, education”. We have never been against testing as such, but the particular tests this year have been a dog’s dinner and a shambles. I know this from numerous examples in my inbox, in my postbag and when people literally collar me when I am trying to go to a fun event at the weekend. Surely it is the Government’s responsibility to make sure that these tests are marked properly.

Nicky Morgan: I appreciate the constructive way in which the hon. Lady is raising her constituent’s concerns. If she writes to me or to the Minister for Schools, we will of course convey her views to the Standards and Testing Agency. I should point out that any comments relating to the review of the marking should be submitted
by 15 July. The hon. Lady may wish to encourage her constituent to submit her thoughts, but I hope that she will contact us and let us know, because the whole point of the system is feedback that will enable us to do better in future years.

Dr Huq: This was really meant to be an intervention, in that it was intended to be very short, but I have managed to spin it out into a speech. I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Graham Stuart: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for spinning out an excellent intervention.

I suppose that what frustrates Conservatives is that the Labour Party wants tests, but then talks about the tensions that they can cause. What kind of tests are required that do not already exist? We have heard nothing constructive from Labour Members. The hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) at least suggested that the grammar test might be a bit over the top. What is wrong with these tests that could be put right, and should be put right, for next year? Any suggestion would be helpful.

Dr Huq: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was listening to the anecdote from the deputy head that mentioned earlier, but it seems that this time round the proper curriculum has not been in place, and the marking is all over the place. It is not testing per se that is wrong; it is the maladministration of this year’s key stage 2 SATs.

In the recent Brexit debate the Lord Chancellor said we have had enough of experts. That is a real mistake; we ignore the professionals at our peril. These are people at the chalk face. Educationists, heads and deputy headteachers like Katie Tramoni and—dare I say it—the NUT have been warning about this. I hope these problems can be rectified and that we hear from the Secretary of State what will be done to minimise next year’s disturbances so that there are no disturbances; otherwise, it will feel as though we are losing sight of the child.

5.5 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq). I resided in that constituency for many years and my eldest daughter went to preschool there, before we escaped to the countryside of East Sussex.

I share the sentiment expressed in the first sentence of this motion: that every child deserves an excellent education that enables them to grow and thrive. In order to deliver this aspiration, it is vital that children are assessed to enable parents and teachers to determine whether the education received is meeting that desired outcome. I therefore welcome the testing at both key stage 1 and key stage 2. The latter is of importance because it will inform parents and secondary schools on the progress reached and development required. The former is of particular importance, for both child and school, in order to assess progress in the intervening four years between each test.

I must declare an interest: having failed my own 12-plus exam, and having attended a secondary school which, by its definition, was for those who had similarly failed, I am disappointed that the motion says that children will be labelled as failures. Instead, these tests should be viewed as methods by which to benchmark progress, not talk about failure.

The motion focuses on the fact that only 53% of children have reached the standard in all three papers.

When broken down, the Department for Education’s

SATs Results

Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Lady give way?
statistics show that 66% have met the standard in reading, 70% in maths and 72% in grammar. The motion is correct in that the rates for 2016 have reduced compared with those for 2015. However, the very aspect of a comparison is wholly misleading because the tests have been changed and made more difficult. It is therefore unsurprising that we now have grade deflation.

What we have now is a rigorous regime that will help drive up progress and standards and help give every child an excellent education that enables them to grow and thrive. Children will not thrive if the tests are set at a level that do not stretch them and inspire them to do better. We should not be alarmed by this benchmark; we should embrace it and do all that we can to help our children to reach their potential.

Rather than turn back to previous methods, we need to give this new regime the chance to bed in. We also need to give our teachers more time and space to teach our children. In that vein, may I make a few positive suggestions which I hope the Department can take on board?

First, teachers have had to spend time getting to grips with the new curriculum. Can we please therefore give teachers some time back so they can focus on inspiring and teaching our children? As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) said, too many teachers are working long hours and we need to help them.

Secondly, I embrace the need for all children to master English and maths so they have the basics aged 11 years. However, there is more to learning than these two subjects. Last weekend, I spent another morning with my seven-year-old and 10-year-old. One had maths homework, the other English. Can we please have time for science, art, history, geography and other subjects, or at least ask our teachers to use them as the basis for maths and English?

Thirdly, comparing our children with those of other nations whom they will be competing with in the global jobs race is helpful, but can we not be as obsessed about it? Perhaps not all our children master maths as well as, say, a child in India or Singapore. However, if we teach our children to be leaders, to be creative, to think outside the box and to inspire, they will probably end up managing a maths genius from India without the need to be one themselves.

A rigorous educational assessment underpins our desire on these Benches to give better life chances to everyone. There are numerous examples in public life of people enjoying a successful education and going on to have a successful career as a result of having had the support and drive of parents and, perhaps, a private education. However, there are not enough examples of success among those who have endured a difficult start, and who may have grown up in deprived communities where parental emphasis on education was lacking and where there was no one to support or inspire them outside the school gates. For those children, their schooling offers them the only route to a better place. This can make a difference to their health, wellbeing and, ultimately, life expectancy. I urge the House to think of that and to embrace the need to assess our children, as this Government are doing, so that every child can reach their true potential.

Vernon Coaker: That is a good point. There has always been a danger of teaching to the test. The guidance for Ofsted during my time as a Minister—to be fair, it is the same under the present Government—was to look at the breadth of the curriculum and to see what emphasis was being placed on subjects outside those specifically designed for the SATs. The good schools have drama, history, sport and other things going on alongside the SAT subjects. In my view, the schools that do best in the tests—especially in relation to young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds—are often those that have that breadth of curriculum and that do drama and all those other things as well. Those subjects can give young people the self-esteem and confidence to achieve in those more academic subjects—for want of a better term—that they have to study.

Will the Minister tell us what he is going to do restore confidence among our teachers? Whatever the rights and wrongs of this, some people in my constituency have been absolutely distraught at the results they have been given. That cannot be right. I am not saying this to make a point; this is a statement of fact. Even in schools that are regarded as outstanding, headteachers have been crying. That cannot be what we want. Let us just reflect on all that. We know that 53% met the Government’s targets, while 47% did not. Perhaps we do not want to use the word “failure”. Is there something of particular concern in the three components? Is one area weaker than the others? Do we need to do more about maths? How are the Government, working with both sides of the House and the unions, going to ensure that we tackle the 47%?
Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend makes an important point about partnership. Where the tone of this debate has gone wrong today is that we have had comments like “Tory bad, Labour good,” “Labour bad, Tory good,” “Unions right, Government wrong,” and “Government right, unions wrong.” However, we owe it to our schools and teachers to work in partnership, because we all want our children to succeed, standards to improve and the United Kingdom to rise in the global league tables.

Vernon Coaker: I agree. Standards have risen over the past couple of decades, but we want them to rise faster. There is still too much inequality and social background still determines educational attainment. We should not blame people; we should ask what is preventing this country from overcoming something that has bedevilled the education system for decades. No one would stand up and say that we want the situation to continue. The question is how we best meet the challenge.

Given the embarrassment of the leaked and abandoned tests, what will the Minister do to improve security in the future? What is his response to the criticism of how the new tests relate to the new curriculum? It was introduced in 2014 and tests are being set on it in 2016—two years for a four-year course. Will that be taken into account? What has been said to schools? Next year, we will be three years into a four-year programme, so will that mean anything for next year’s testing? We all want to hear about that. It would be ridiculous to pretend that this year’s SATs have been an unmitigated success given the real problems. What are the Government going to do about that? How will they improve things? That is what parents, schools and all of us want to hear.

What will the key stage 2 results mean for schools’ Ofsted categorisation? If a school has seen its results collapse, what will that mean when Ofsted go in in September? I do not know the answer, which is why I am asking. The Secretary of State is nodding her head, but I do not know the answer. People want clarity. What will the results mean for a school’s Ofsted categorisation? If the Government set a standard and large numbers of pupils fall below it, including those at schools currently categorised as outstanding, what will that mean when Ofsted inspectors go in? Will the school get cast out? Perhaps not, but that is what schools want to—[Interruption.] The Minister will respond to that to reassure people—thank you.

The SATs have had real problems. Everybody in the House agrees that we need to improve standards. We will never reach a point at which we are all satisfied. Everyone will always want more, but what are we going to do about the problems? How will the tests that have been introduced allow us to build on any progress? What are we doing to reassure schools? What are we doing to reassure headteachers, teachers and parents? What will be different next year to prevent what has happened this year from happening again? Those are the sorts of questions that I was trying to intervene on the Secretary of State to ask. I was not trying to get up and say, “Tories wicked, Labour brilliant.” I just wanted to ask, because, with respect, I thought that people were not going to get answers to their detailed questions. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden) will no doubt ask similar questions, but I will be grateful if the Minister answers some of them and makes some other points.

5.19 pm

Mr Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. First, I should comment on the uniformly thoughtful and interesting contributions from Back Benchers. Let me begin by mentioning the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who challenged the Secretary of State on the whole issue of secondary improvements. Although that is not the subject of this debate, secondary schools would be assisted if they and their heads did not have to worry about how to play catch-up on key stage 2 SATs fails.

The hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh), in a thoughtful speech, was rightfully caustic about some of the Secretary of State’s newspeak on SATs. His quote from one of his respected local headteachers about this being “one big mess” is devastating, so we should all take it into account. It is worth mentioning that, in a survey, 97% of primary teachers and leaders expressed concern that schools were preparing pupils for the tests at the expense of the wider curriculum, and other Members have spoken about that today. The hon. Gentleman also talked about a sense of common enterprise. His contribution, like others, pointed out that we need not only a sense of common enterprise, but evidence-driven policy.

The hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), the former Chair of the Education Committee, used the interesting word “volatility” to describe what has happened this year. That was not a great word to use; his five years as Chair might have given him a choice set of words to describe the fiasco of the process and outcomes that this year’s SATs have left us with. He also talked about the need for people to row back in, but surely the whole problem is that the specs were not there in time for them to do so. That point needs to be taken on board.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) struck a chord with many Members by talking about the way in which we need to keep our teachers with us. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) regaled us with tales of her days, and perhaps the Secretary of State’s days, in the sandpit. Apart from that, the most enlightening thing in my hon. Friend’s speech was when she relayed what her local headteacher, Katie, said. Perhaps it should have been what Katie did and what Katie did next. To be fair, the Secretary of State was gracious and told us what Katie needs to do next: get her thought in before 15 July. Again, this raises the issue that people can have legitimate concerns without being anti-testing.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) said that the tests should not be set to a low benchmark. Nobody in the House would dispute that point. He said that there needs to be more time for prep and more time for learning subjects other than English and maths. Perhaps we can welcome him as an additional recruit to those of us who talked to the Minister last week about the need to widen the EBacc.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) rightly expressed concerns that some of the outstanding schools in his constituency have had bizarrely low results. He also rightly asked what the Government would do about the security of the tests. I hope that the Minister will take on board those issues in his response.
My hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State got an unfair blistering from the Secretary of State. My colleague painted a stark picture of the strengths and skills of the young people who took the tests this year being cast aside or ignored because they have been the guinea pigs and victims of the Department’s shambles this year. She did show passion, and she needed to do so, because the pupils who took this year’s key stage 2 SATs have been very badly let down. Why is that? It is because the Department’s resources and Ministers’ focus were obsessively trained on their national programme of academisation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), among others, said when the previous statement was made, they took their eye off the ball. Tens of thousands of children have suffered, and for what? For a humiliating climbdown on forced academisation under fire from the Government’s own side, which now means that the Secretary of State will have to swerve and dodge in the academy-lite education policy as it barreled forward. Tens of thousands of children have been very badly let down. Why is that? It is because the pupils who took this year’s key stage 2 SATs Results

start”, but Anne Watson, who was the emeritus professor of mathematics education at the University of Oxford, said:

“The aim to raise standards has resulted in a new way to measure performance so that no comparative judgments can be made… This means we do not know from the data alone whether the Government has done a good job or a bad job and whether the test designers and score-scalers have done a good job or a bad job.”

After all, these results mean that, according to this Government, 47% of children in this country are not ready for secondary school. How do we tell children and their parents that?

The Secretary of State—the Minister has said this on another occasion—talked about the fact that pupils either “don’t mind” or “enjoy” taking these tests, and the ComRes poll gave them some comfort in that respect. Pupils might not mind taking the test, but they mind with absolute justification the test being taken out of context and their teachers being left frustrated that they are not able to engage at an early enough stage.

When the Minister made his statement in May, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe made an absolutely key point:

“By rushing ahead with the policy without properly involving professionals or parents, the Government failed to spot the fundamental flaw in the design, which was that the test that they had developed were insufficiently comparable. As a result, they were forced to abandon their approach to baseline test entirely.”

He went on to say:

“There has been a constant stream of chop and change in primary assessment under this Government. Since September, the Department for Education has updated or clarified on average at least one primary school assessment resource every other working day.”—[Official Report, 10 May 2016; Vol. 609, c. 554.]

We do not regard that as good enough.

On the floor standard, I think the Secretary of State said that the details would be made available in September, yet her Department told Schools Week that the results would not be published until December. Whether it is September or December—the Secretary of State or the Minister is welcome to clarify this—what an indictment it is that schools should have that sword of Damocles over their head for four or six months.

Ultimately, this comes down to what happens in individual Members’ constituencies and the responses that they get. In my own area of Lancashire, the spokesman for the National Association of Head Teachers said that, with 94% of Lancashire schools judged good or outstanding by Ofsted, “there is something wrong in the assessment process”, and that schools need to support their children and their staff “and carry out what is effectively damage limitation.”

Last Friday I visited one of my primary schools in Blackpool, where the head and others are doing some extremely good work. I observed a session with an excellent Pobble literacy tutor, but when I spoke afterwards to the head, he had a huge sense of frustration that the school had not been able to structure its exam preparation because of the continuous chopping and changing to which I and my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe have referred. The head said, “I fear it will put more pressure on testing in these students’ first year in secondary schools.” The schools will not regard the tests as useful,
and the consequence will be deflated students and pressured parents—those are my observations, not those of the head.

The years between the ages of nine and 11 are almost as crucial for young people as the time of transfer to secondary school. I am old enough—I suspect that others in the Chamber may be old enough—to remember the nine-plus. I remember from doing the nine-plus that it was a testing time, so it is not good enough for the Minister and the Secretary of State to draw a veil over this year’s results by setting up straw people and saying that the Opposition or other critics are not interested in testing or in standards. We are interested in both, but we are also interested in their being delivered competently, and this Government have not shown competence.

5.33 pm

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): This has been a good debate, if a short one, about how we ensure that children leave primary school fluent in the basic building blocks of an education. Over the past six years this Government have been determined to ensure that our education system is properly equipping the next generation of school leavers with the knowledge and skills that they need for life in the modern economy, and the ability to compete in an increasingly global jobs market.

Under the remarkable leadership of the Prime Minister and of my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), now the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, and my right hon. Friend the current Secretary of State for Education, we have introduced the most far-reaching education reforms for generations—reforms which are working.

Of course, it would have been easier not to have engaged with the reforms, and to have allowed the continued inflation of results—the year-on-year increases in GCSE grades and SAT test results—masking our decline in standards compared with the most successful education systems in the world. It would have been easier not to take on the vested interests; easier not to encourage more take-up of EBacc; easier not to insist on more pupils taking the core academic subjects that make up the EBacc; easier not to increase the numbers taking foreign languages; easier not to challenge the publishers and demand better textbooks; easier not to insist on more pupils doing well is to ensure that pupils are not only fluent in foreign languages; easier not to encourage more take-up of maths and physics A-levels.

But we were determined to halt Britain’s decline in the PISA international league tables, which showed the UK falling from seventh in reading in 2000 to 25th by 2009, and from eighth in maths to 28th, and we fell further still in the 2012 PISA survey. We therefore appointed a panel of experts, who examined the curricula of those countries that topped the PISA rankings. We produced a new primary national curriculum, which we consulted on in 2012 and finalised in 2013, and which came into force in 2014, with the first new SATs tests taken two years later, in May 2016.

The new curriculum requires fluency in reading, and it requires phonics in the early years of primary school, followed by a focus on development of fluency in spelling and handwriting techniques, and grammar and punctuation, which were neglected for decades, have been restored to the school curriculum.

In maths, we looked to the Singapore primary maths curriculum, ensuring fluency in calculation technique, long multiplication, long division and fractions. We reduced the age by which all children should know their times tables from 11 to nine. This year, we piloted a computer-based multiplication tables test. I visit schools up and down the country, and I see more and more pupils fluent in their times tables. That was not so six years ago.

The academic year 2015 was always going to be a challenge, with the new maths and English GCSEs being introduced for first teaching from September 2015. The new, revised GCSEs are on a par with the qualifications taught in the best-performing countries in the world. That is what the education reforms are about: raising academic standards in our schools, raising expectations and raising aspiration. And they are working. The focus on phonics has raised reading standards. In 2011, when we trialled the new phonics check—a short test to ensure six-year-olds are mastering the basic skill of reading simple words—just 32% passed. In 2012, 58% passed, and that rose to 69% in 2013, 74% in 2014 and 77% last year. That means that 120,000 more six-year-olds today are reading more effectively than they otherwise would, because of this Government’s reforms and the focus on phonics.

The new SATs in reading are designed to resist teaching to the test. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) hinted, the way for pupils to do well is to have read a lot during their time at primary school—to have read increasingly challenging books and to have developed the habit of reading regularly. That is why 88% of pupils at Harris Primary School in Peckham Park reached the expected standard in the new reading test. It is why 88% at Elmhurst Primary School in Newham reached at least the expected standard in reading.

The new maths SATs are made up of one arithmetic paper and two maths reasoning papers. The only way to do well is to ensure that pupils are not only fluent in mathematical calculation, but have a deep, conceptual understanding that comes from practice and good teaching. That is why 94% of pupils at Elmhurst Primary School achieved at least the expected standard and 96% of pupils at Harris Junior Academy in Carshalton reached at least the expected standard.

The hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) read a letter from an experienced headteacher in his constituency to his pupils. However, the tests are designed, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, to hold schools to account, not pupils. We know we are asking more, but we are doing that because we are committed to giving young people the best start in life.

This year’s results are the first to be released following the introduction of a more rigorous national curriculum, which is on a par with the best in the world. The results show that there is no limit to our children’s potential, and that schools can rise to the challenge of ensuring that pupils meet the new, higher standards. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) pointed out, neither schools nor parents should try to compare this year’s results with those in previous years; they simply cannot be compared directly. We have published data to show the national averages for the number of pupils meeting the new expected standard. That allows schools to see how their pupils have performed against
the national average, which is a much more useful comparison for schools and parents.

The hon. Member for Southport also raised the challenge of the new grammar test. I have to tell him that the national curriculum tests that were sat this May took over three years to develop. During that process, they go through rounds of expert review, which includes teachers, curriculum experts, markers, special educational needs and disability experts, inclusion experts and cultural experts. The questions are also trialled twice with pupils at the appropriate age—once to check that the questions are functioning as required and that children give appropriate answers, and once to determine the difficulty of the questions, which are improved throughout the process.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) asked the relevant questions about whether we, as a country, are doing a good enough job in educating our young people. As he said, too many children are not given enough knowledge and skills to flourish in secondary school. He is right to point out that there are always challenges when new tests are introduced, but as the tests bed down, teachers become more familiar with the curriculum.

The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) cited the headteacher at Christ the Saviour Church of England Primary School, an outstanding school in her constituency, as being worried about the floor standards. The Secretary of State has made it clear that given the greater challenge of the new SATs, the number of schools regarded as being below the floor will not be greater than 1 percentage point more than last year. In response to the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden), we are publishing provisional progress figures early in September so that schools will know if they are below the floor. The December figure is the finalised figure after adjustments for errors.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle pointed out that there is more to education than English and maths, and that we need more time in primary school for science, for art, for history and for geography. I totally agree. A knowledge-rich curriculum is key, and that is what the best primary schools in this country are delivering.

The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) says he knows of too many schools that have seen a sharp drop in their results this year. He is right that the results will focus the minds of the schools that are struggling to deliver the results that other schools in similar circumstances are delivering, and we will help them with that challenge. The stage 1 national funding formula consultation shows that we are proposing to introduce a lower prior attainment factor that will provide extra support to help children catch up.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned Ofsted and the impact that it will have through the new, more challenging assessments. I have acknowledged that point. I have already written to Sir Michael Wilshaw to ask Ofsted to take into account, when inspectors examine schools, the fact that this is the first year of much more challenging tests and a much more challenging curriculum.

Vernon Coaker: For me, this is one of the most fundamental points. What does the phrase “take into account” mean? Does it mean that Ofsted reads it and then does nothing about it? I appreciate its independence, but this is a fundamental point. I have been where the Minister is in taking these things into account and looking into them, and so on, but schools absolutely want reassurance about whether they are going to go from being outstanding to being at risk. It would be helpful if he said a little more about that.

Mr Gibb: Experience so far is that inspectors are already taking my letter into account and adjusting their judgments. They are not looking at raw data in an unintelligent way; they are looking at it intelligently, reflecting the concerns raised in my letter. We have also now introduced the progress measure, which means that progress will be a much more important part of determining whether a school falls below the floor.

The hon. Member for Blackpool South asked about Pearson. It has investigated the leak and taken a number of steps to ensure that rogue markers do not deliberately release marking schemes in future, and it is tightening up its contractual arrangements.

As a result of this Government’s education reform, 66% of secondary schools and 19% of primary schools now have academy status, with the professional autonomy that this brings. A total of 1.45 million more pupils are in schools rated “good” or “outstanding” by Ofsted than in 2010. More pupils are taking and securing good grades in the core academic subjects at GCSE that employers and universities most value. More pupils are studying foreign languages and taking A-levels in maths, physics and chemistry. As a result of our reforms more children are reading fluently, and doing so earlier.

I was saddened by the approach taken by the new shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner). Yesterday, in a Westminster Hall debate on term-time holidays, she supported our reforms to improve school attendance. Today, she is reverting to the approach of her predecessor—but one, the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), in opposing the rise in academic standards and the rise in expectations that the new SATs reflect and assess. She is, alas, simply kowtowing to the NUT “line to take”. This Government are about raising standards, raising expectations and delivering successful and effective reform. I urge the House to reject Labour’s motion.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 178, Noes 278.

Division No. 43

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Alin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Kevin
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr
Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cunningham, Mr
Cunningham, Alex
Creasy, Stella
Creagh, Mary
Coyle, Neil
Cooper, Yvette
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Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Leslie, Chris
Leahy, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Field, Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiell, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, John
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Johnston, rh Alan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirk, Peter
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lucas, Caroline
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame
Mulholland, Greg
Murray, Ian
Onn, Melanie
Onurrah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pennycook, Matthew
Perks, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Rees, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, Rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulp
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, cat
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smynth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
 Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twin, John
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Winnick, Mr David
Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Berestford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berrv, James
Blackman, Bob
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshore, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Callard, Neil
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishi, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffee, Dr Thérèse
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djankogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Downen, Oliver
Wright, Mr lain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Holly Lynch and Jeff Smith

Doxel-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fallon, rh Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Fransois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greengren, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

**INCOME TAX**

That the draft Major Sporting Events (Income Tax Exemption) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 27 June, be approved.—(Kris Hopkins.)

*Question agreed to.*

**Motion made, and Question put,**

**SENIOR COURTS OF ENGLAND AND WALES**

**DELEGATED LEGISLATION**

The draft Civil Proceedings, First-tier Tribunal, Upper Tribunal and Employment Tribunals Fees (Amendment) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 26 May, be approved.—(Kris Hopkins.)

**The House divided:** Ayes 278, Noes 218.

**Division No. 44**

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<tr>
<th><strong>AYES</strong></th>
<th><strong>Tellers for the Noes:</strong></th>
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<td>Adams, Nigel</td>
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### SATs Results

255 256 12 JULY 2016
Leadsom, Andrea  
Lee, Dr Phillip  
Lefroy, Jeremy  
Leigh, Sir Edward  
Letwin, r Mr Oliver  
Lewis, Brandon  
Liddell-Grainger, Mr lan  
Lidington, r Mr David  
Liley, rh Mr Peter  
Lopresti, Jack  
Lord, Jonathan  
Loughton, Tim  
Lumley, Karen  
Mackinlay, Craig  
Main, Mrs Anne  
Mak, Mr Alan  
Mann, Scott  
Mathias, Dr Tania  
Maynard, Paul  
McCart, Jason  
McLoughlin, r Mr Patrick  
McPartland, Stephen  
Merce, Johnny  
Merriman, Huw  
Metcalfe, Stephen  
Miller, rh Mrs Maria  
Milling, Amanda  
Milton, rh Anne  
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
Mordaunt, Penny  
Morgan, rh Nicky  
Morris, Anne Marie  
Morris, David  
Morris, James  
Morton, Wendy  
Mowat, David  
Murray, Mrs Sheryll  
Murrison, Dr Andrew  
Neill, Robert  
Nokes, Caroline  
Offord, Dr Matthew  
Opperman, Guy  
Parish, Neil  
Paterson, r Mr Owen  
Pawsey, Mark  
Penning, rh Mike  
Penrose, John  
Percy, Andrew  
Phillips, Stephen  
Philip, Chris  
Pickles, rh Sir Eric  
Pincher, Christopher  
Poulter, Dr Daniel  
Pow, Rebecca  
Prentis, Victoria  
Pursglove, Tom  
Quin, Jeremy  
Quince, Will  
Raab, Mr Dominic  
Redwood, rh John  
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob  
Robinson, Mary  
Rosindell, Andrew  
Rudd, rh Amber  
Rutley, David  
Sandbach, Antoinette  
Selous, Andrew  
Shapps, rh Grant  
Sharma, Alok  
Shelby, Alec  
Simpson, rh Mr Keith  
Skidmore, Chris  
Smith, Chloe  
Smith, Henry  
Smith, Julian  
Smith, Royston  
Solloway, Amanda  
Soubry, rh Anna  
Spearman, rh Mrs Caroline  
Spencer, Mark  
Stephenson, Andrew  
Stevenson, John  
Stewart, Bob  
Stewart, Ian  
Stewart, Rory  
Streeter, Mr Gary  
Stride, Mel  
Stuart, Graham  
Sturdy, Julian  
Sunak, Rishi  
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
Swire, rh Mr Hugo  
Syms, Mr Robert  
Thomas, Derek  
Throup, Maggie  
Timpson, Edward  
Tohur, Kelly  
Tomlinson, Justin  
Tomlinson, Michael  
Tracey, Craig  
Abbott, Ms Diane  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Alexander, Heidi  
Ali, Rushanara  
Allen, Mr Graham  
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
Arkless, Richard  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Barron, r Kevin  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Black, Mhairi  
Blackford, Ian  
Blackman, Kirsty  
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  
Blomfield, Paul  
Boswell, Philip  
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  
Brennan, Kevin  
Brock, Deidre  
Brown, Alan  
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
Bryant, Chris  
Buck, Ms Karen  
Burden, Richard  
Burgon, Richard  
Butler, Dawn  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Campbell, rh Mr Alan  
Champion, Sarah  
Chapman, Jenny  
Cherry, Joanna  
Coaker, Vernon  
Cooper, Helen  
Cooper, Rosie  
Cooper, rh Yvette  
Cowan, Ronnie  
Coyle, Neil  
Creagh, Mary  
Creasy, Stella  
Cruddas, Jon  
Cunningham, Alex  
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Dakin, Nic  
Danczuk, Simon  
David, Wayne  
Davies, Geraint  
Day, Martyn  
De Piero, Gloria  
Dockerty-Hughes, Martin  
Donaldson, Stuart Blair  
Doughty, Stephen  
Dowd, Jim  
Dowd, Peter  
Dromey, Jack  
Dugher, Michael  
Duran, Mark  
Edwards, Jonathan  
Efford, Clive  
Elliott, Julie  
Ellman, Mrs Louise  
Elmore, Chris  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Fellows, Marion  
Ferrier, Margaret  
Field, rh Frank  
Fitzpatrick, Jim  
Fiello, Robert  
Fletcher, Colleen  
Flint, rh Caroline  
Flynn, Paul  
Fovargue, Yvonne  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Furniss, Gill  
Gardiner, Barry  
Gibson, Patricia  
Glass, Pat  
Glindon, Mary  
Godsiff, Mr Roger  
Goodman, Helen  
Tredinnick, David  
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie  
Tugendhat, Tom  
Turner, Mr Andrew  
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew  
Vara, Mr Shailesh  
Vickers, Martin  
Walker, Mr Charles  
Walker, Mr Robin  
Warburton, David  
Warman, Matt  
Wharton, James  
Wheeler, Heather  
White, Chris  
Whittaker, Craig  
Whittingdale, rh Mr John  
Wiggin, Bill  
Williams, Craig  
Williamson, rv Gavin  
Wilson, Mr Rob  
Wollaston, Dr Sarah  
Wragg, William  
Wright, rh Jeremy  
Zahawi, Nadhim
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hiller, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kyle, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Law, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lucas, Caroline
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mallahra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
Meaile, Sir Alan
Meams, Ian
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Omurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Paul
Sheppard, Tommy
Shettel, Paul
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeh, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Tami, Mark
Thewlis, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Thombery, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twiig, Derek
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Winnick, Mr David
Wishart, Pete
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes: Holly Lynch and Jeff Smith

Petition accordingly agreed to.

Dr Keilloh and the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service

6.9 pm
Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): I rise to present a petition relating to Dr Keilloh and the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service. Over 3,000 petitioners believe that Dr Keilloh has suffered a miscarriage of justice and would like him reinstated as a practising medical doctor.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to take note of the damage done to Doctor Keilloh’s life and career by what the petitioners believe to have been a flawed disciplinary process; and call on the House to urge the Government to re-examine the statutory basis for the jurisdiction of the MPTS with a view to remedying this and potential future injustices; and to urge the Government to open an investigation into the written statements from the Iraqi witnesses as presented by Public Interest Lawyers, and the evidence they gave under cross examination in the Al-Sweady inquiry, the original British army court-martial in the Baha Mousa case, the Baha Mousa Public Inquiry and Dr Keilloh’s Fitness to Practice hearing.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the UK,
Dr Keilloh and the Medical Practitioners Register was a travesty of justice; further that the petitioners believe that it was not in the public interest to have a community deprived of their so obviously well-loved and much appreciated family doctor; further that the petitioners believe that it is unfair that any appeal against the decision can only be made within 28 days when the doctor has just been deprived of his or her income, and no longer has financial support for legal affairs and is in a state of shock; further that the petitioners call into question why well documented 'inattentional blindness' was not taken into consideration during the MPTS hearing; further that the Professional Standards Authority only exists to protect patients and will only investigate Fitness to Practise outcomes if they believe that the sanctions have been too lenient, not if the patients complain that the sanction has been too severe, prejudiced or faulty; further that there is no equivalent body to support the registrants; further that previously a handwritten petition from 1,034 patients and colleagues was sent to the MPTS and to Parliament in 2013 asking for his reinstatement; further that the petitioners have been informed that the new statutory rules governing MPTS procedures 'Adjudication Section 60 Order' which were brought about in December 2015 now allow the General Medical Council (GMC) to review the MPTS decisions, the petitioners believe that although it probably cannot be post dated the new ruling should make a difference in bringing about justice in this case; further that the petitioners believe that the case was prejudiced by the publication of damaging articles in the media, some of which quote the MPTS tribunal chairperson as pronouncing Doctor Keilloh guilty even before the commencement of the hearing; further that the petitioners call into question that the MPTS panel of three people was able to strike Doctor Keilloh off on probability which was not beyond reasonable doubt for supposed public interest failing rather than any...
clinical failing; further that the petitioners believe that the complainant against Doctor Keilloh was Phil Shiner of Public Interest Lawyers, a lawyer acting on behalf of complainants not from this country, about an event in a war zone almost ten years ago, rather than from his NHS patients who are the people who have suffered from Doctor Keilloh’s erasure; further that the petitioners believe that in this case written statements from witnesses for the prosecution, presented by Phil Shiner, the lawyer acting on their behalf, were accepted by the MPTS panel without opportunity for cross examination; further that the petitioners understand that Phil Shiner has been under investigation for professional misconduct by the Solicitors Regulation Authority and is now to face a tribunal; and further that an online petition on a similar matter has been signed by 3,496 individuals.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to take note of the damage done to Doctor Keilloh’s life and career by what the petitioners believe to have been a flawed disciplinary process; and call on the House to urge the Government to re-examine the statutory basis for the jurisdiction of the MPTS with a view to remedying this and potential future injustices; and to urge the Government to open an investigation into the written statements from the Iraqi witnesses as presented by Public Interest Lawyers, and the evidence they gave under cross examination in the Al-Sweady inquiry, the original British army court-martial in the Baha Mousa case, the Baha Mousa Public Inquiry and Dr Keilloh’s Fitness to Practice hearing.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P001700]
that the changes to the housing cap could cost it up to £500,000 a year and plunge four of its key schemes in the city into financial chaos.

**Peter Aldous:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. I come across many such cases, and I shall produce some statistics to confirm it. It is very important to have specific case studies on the ground that emphasise the serious nature of the problem we face.

There are also local providers in Suffolk and in my own constituency, such as Access Community Trust, Stonham, Orwell housing association and the Professional Deputy Service, that provide advice and support to vulnerable dependent people. There are charities and social investors either already active in the sector or wanting to get involved, such as Emmaus, Cheyne’s Social Property Impact Fund and HB Villages. The depth and breadth of interest and concern emphasise the importance of putting in place a sustainable framework for the future funding of supported housing and the need to do so quickly.

**Mr Stewart Jackson** (Peterborough) (Con): I echo the welcome of my hon. Friend for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) for this debate. Is not “alaricity” the key word, in that 9,270 units—80% of all pipeline development in specialist housing—are under threat? Welcome though the review is, what we need is a quick decision from the Government to put on a firmer footing the long-term sustainable funding of specialist housing.

**Peter Aldous:** Thank you. Friend that intervention. He is right that we are getting to a stage when speed is very much of the essence.

The case for supported housing is compelling. There is a rising demand for care and support owing to an ageing population and increased levels of mental health and learning disabilities. As the National Housing Federation has pointed out, supported housing enables older people to retain their independence, and young people to live securely and in some cases to get their lives back on track; it ensures that victims of domestic violence are able to find emergency refuge and to stabilise their lives; it helps homeless people with complex and multiple needs to make the transition from living on the street to a settled home with education, training or employment; and it ensures that people with mental health needs can stabilise their lives and live more independently.

**Mr Steve Baker** (Wycombe) (Con): I want to say to the Minister that my hon. Friend has hit the nub of the problem. Such housing units have all these additional costs, which raises the issue of whether introducing this cap is at all appropriate for supported housing. Perhaps the Government should take stock and think again about what exactly is done in this sector.

**Peter Aldous:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I shall come on to make that very point.

The National Housing Federation has also pointed out that ex-servicemen and women are able to find a stable home, and this includes those with mental health and physical disability needs; and that people with learning disabilities are able to maximise their independence and to exercise choice and control over their lives. It should also be pointed out that investment in supported housing can provide an alternative to more expensive residential care settings.

**Graeme M. Morris** (Easington) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate on a very important subject. Does he acknowledge that the Homes and Communities Agency has identified savings to the taxpayer of £640 million through investment in supported housing?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I did not interrupt while the hon. Gentleman was in full flow, but I must point out that by very long-standing convention, we cannot have interventions from Opposition Front-Bench Members in Adjournment debates. It looks as though the hon. Gentleman was not aware of that convention, but he is now.

**Peter Aldous:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I, too, am now aware of that convention, although the hon. Gentleman’s point was a good one.

The development of new supported housing schemes using innovative models is of vital strategic importance to councils providing adult social care services. It will help them meet the care and support needs of an ageing population, making the best use of limited budgets. Such models provide people with greater independence, meet the support needs of individuals and are more cost-effective than residential provision.

**Mr Robin Walker** (Worcester) (Con): I apologise for missing the first few words of my hon. Friend’s speech. He is making a strong case.

Worcestershire County Council, which has contacted me, fears that some of the schemes on which it is working with Fortis Living and the Rooftop Housing Group may be under threat as a result of this application of the cap. The council wanted me to ensure that my hon. Friend expressed those concerns this evening.

**Peter Aldous:** The position in Suffolk is the same as the position in Worcestershire.

**Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has been very generous in giving way, and he is making a powerful speech. Insecurity about funding, and the funding model, makes it difficult for a number of housing associations, including Stonham, to develop new products and secure the investment that they need in order to help people to maintain their independence in supported housing in a cost-effective way. Is that not the nub of the problem?

**Peter Aldous:** The hon. Lady is right. We are experiencing a period of limbo and uncertainty in which nothing is happening, and schemes that are desperately needed are not being developed.

Research shows that when a person with learning disabilities moves from residential care to supported living, about £185 per week can be saved. If that is
extrapolated nationally, it means a saving of at least £72 million per annum for social care commissioning budgets. However, specialised supported housing has other advantages in comparison with residential care.

In a care home, the minimum standard for an individual room is 12 square metres, whereas in an apartment in specialised supported housing it is about 50 square metres. In a care home, support is organised to meet the demands of group living, whereas in specialised supported housing it is tailored to meet the needs of the individual.

The Homes and Communities Agency has found that supported housing provision has a net positive benefit of £640 million for UK taxpayers. At present there is a shortage of 15,640 places, or 14% of supply, and if the current trends continue, the shortfall will double by 2019-20. Furthermore, there are 30,000 people in the UK with learning difficulties who are over 70 and still living with their parents. According to research conducted by Papworth Trust, 1.8 million people require some form of accessible housing, and the number is growing year on year. When disabled people are living in accessible homes that meet their needs, their quality of life is dramatically enhanced, and their job prospects also benefit.

The message is clear: there is a compelling case for supported housing, demand for which is increasing year by year. If we do not put its funding on a secure, sustainable long-term footing, a significant proportion of existing supported housing schemes will be forced to close, which will leave many vulnerable and disadvantaged people with nowhere to live. Moreover, the much-needed new accommodation will not be built.

If we are to find a sustainable long-term solution to the problem of funding for supported housing, it is necessary to think outside the narrow departmental confines of the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Work and Pensions. It is necessary to break out of the silos, and to think holistically. Supported housing is not just a matter for the DCLG and the DWP, because it is not just about housing and benefits. It is a case for the Department of Health, as it concerns physical and mental healthcare. It is a job for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, as it concerns the preparation of vulnerable people for the workplace. It is a case for councils, whether it involves housing authorities or social care providers. It is of interest to housing associations, charities and social investors who are keen to pursue innovative projects that would change people’s lives. Achieving good supported housing requires a focused partnership between housing authorities, housing associations, care and support providers, and councils delivering social care.

What all that means is that supported housing is not just about housing. Because it delivers benefits far beyond the walls of the DWP and the DCLG, it is appropriate to consider securing funding from a wide range of potential sources, including other Departments. In the fullness of time, devolved government may also have a role to play.

Mr Jackson: My hon. Friend makes a typically powerful speech. Does he agree that each year we have delayed discharge crises across acute hospital trusts in England, and were we to think long term about how we fund supported housing, it could pay for itself in terms of a reduction in the cost to the taxpayer of these crises, which happen every winter?

Peter Aldous: My hon. Friend makes a good point. If we raise our eyes and think long term, instead of just short term, savings will be produced that can deliver the far better, high-quality supported housing we need.

Dr Poulter: Does my hon. Friend agree that the reality on the ground is that the lack of suitable supported housing is leading to hospitals and mental health wards having to discharge people either on to the streets in some cases, which is most undesirable as they will include some very vulnerable people, or into other very unsuitable housing situations? This issue needs to be addressed, and conversations need to be had with the Department of Health to make that happen.

Peter Aldous: I agree. It is important not to look at a specific type of housing in silos, because all types of housing are interrelated: we cause a problem in one, and it has a negative spin-off effect in another.

The prospect of the local housing allowance cap being applied to residents in supported housing after the one-year delay is causing considerable unease and concern in the sector. With housing benefit set to be abolished as part of the roll-out of universal credit, it is appropriate for the Government to review the future funding of supported housing. However, feedback from the National Housing Federation reveals that the threat of a crude LHA cap is having a detrimental effect.

Some 24% of supported housing providers have told the NHF that all their supported and sheltered housing units are at risk of becoming unviable and of closing. It is estimated that 136,000 units of existing supported and sheltered housing would become unviable and at risk of closure; that is 41% of all existing schemes. There would also be an impact on future development, with an estimated 9,270 units in the pipeline not being developed. That represents 80% of the total existing development pipeline and includes more than 8,000 specialist homes for older people and people with disabilities which were announced in last year’s comprehensive spending review.

The cap undermines several pieces of legislation introduced by the last Government. The introduction of specified accommodation in 2014 establishes a precedent of treating supported housing differently from other forms of social housing. In addition to being eligible for higher rates of housing benefit, specified accommodation has been removed from the current universal credit arrangements, and it is also exempt from the benefit cap. Failure to recognise this unique status when applying the cap is not only inconsistent with previous policy, but it also places at severe risk the step Government have already taken to protect housing for the most disadvantaged. It also threatens one of the Government’s own flagship policies, the transforming care programme, which relies on supported accommodation being available in the community.

In 2014 a rental agreement was approved by the Homes and Communities Agency that allowed registered social landlords to increase their rents by inflation plus 1% annually for the next 10 years. The purpose of the agreement was to provide RSLs with a stable base from
which to invest in their services, including the provision of new supported housing. By capping social rents, the Government have removed this stability, making it virtually impossible for providers of supported housing to plan future developments. For those who have already invested in new schemes, the cap will also jeopardise their ability to meet the existing financial returns of current investments.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful and learned speech. People often get things wrong in debates on housing benefit. I have completed many Government documents to set up new housing schemes specifically for victims of domestic violence. The Government have signed off on funding for such projects based on the current housing benefit rates, and they are now putting their own work in jeopardy.

Peter Aldous: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention, which provides a clear illustration of the point that I am making.

Inside Housing’s snap survey found that 95% of supported housing providers will be forced to wind up some or all of their schemes. HB Villages wants to invest in new developments. It requires no public grant, but the investment can only be made if returns from future rents are protected through continued rent exemption. I fully appreciate that Lord Freud’s review must be comprehensive and based on as much evidence as possible. It will also be important not to rush it, if we are to arrive at a sustainable long-term funding solution. However, an early assurance from the Government—perhaps from the Minister tonight—that the cap will not apply to supported housing will remove the uncertainty that currently hangs over the sector.

In framing their proposals for the funding of supported housing, it is vital that the Government have in mind the needs of those charities, housing associations and social investors already active and doing great work in the sector as well as those looking to get involved. There is an enormous amount of goodwill and capital waiting in the wings. If the right framework is put in place, those organisations, charities and investors will step up to the plate and carry out projects. In doing so, they will bring significant benefits to the lives of many.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that women’s refuge accommodation in Scotland is often owned by local authorities or housing associations? Scottish Women’s Aid estimates that a one-bedroom flat in a city such as Glasgow would incur a £7,100 a year loss. Does he agree that if the policy on the cap is not changed, those services will become unsustainable?

Peter Aldous: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. This evening’s interventions started off with an East Anglian flavour, but they have now widened to cover the whole country. This is very much a national crisis. Going back to East Anglia, however, a housing association active in Suffolk has emphasised to me the importance of a long-term plan. It says that it cannot run a business with a 10-year outlook on the back of local authority annual discretionary housing payments.

An organisation I would like briefly to mention is Emmaus. It was set up in the UK 25 years ago just outside Cambridge by Selwyn Image. It now has 28 communities across the UK supporting more than 700 vulnerable people, with the objective of increasing that figure to 1,000 by 2020. It needs the seedcorn of a stable funding regime in order to set up new communities such as All Hallows at Ditchingham, which is near Bungay in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) but which also serves my constituency and several others in the surrounding area. Ultimately, with the right initial support, Emmaus communities are self-funding. Research shows that the social return on investment in its communities, using the Treasury’s recommended discount rate of 3.5%, is £11 for every £1 invested. In addition, the present value of savings to the state is nearly £6 million per annum for a contribution of just over £2.7 million in housing benefit.

Providing the right long-term investment framework will also encourage the provision in new developments of adaptive technologies, which not only enhance residents’ lives but can also produce significant cost savings for local commissioning councils, releasing funds for investment elsewhere. Research by HB Villages shows that the introduction of adaptive technologies can produce savings of between £3 million and £7.8 million—7% to 20% of budget—in a typical council.

In conclusion, I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response and hope that he will answer the following questions. How is the evidence review going? Will the results be available? Are the wide range of interested parties in the sector being consulted? What is the impact of the roll out of universal credit? Will he give early confirmation tonight that the threat of the crude local housing allowance cap will be removed after next April? In putting in place the new framework for the future funding of supported housing I urge the Government to be sympathetic and visionary and to think strategically. It is important for the futures of so many vulnerable people that the Government pursue such a course.

6.36 pm

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to be able to contribute to this important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) not only on his well-judged and sensible remarks, but on his commitment to the issue, as well as hon. and right hon. Members from across the House. When we discussed this matter in March, the Minister was receptive.

It would also be remiss of me not to record my delight at the result of my party’s leadership process. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), our new party leader and, from tomorrow, Prime Minister, has made a specific and strong commitment to housing, making it perhaps the No. 1 issue in our country. That is important.

I welcome the Government’s decision to undertake a detailed strategic review of supported and specialist housing in response to a groundswell of concern not only from registered providers across the country, but from constituency Members of Parliament. I want to make a few general comments—I do not have the same command of the facts and figures as my hon. Friend the
Member for Waveney—and to talk about the impact on my constituency and the surrounding area. I am extremely grateful to Alan Lewin, the chief executive of Axiom Housing Association, who has provided me with a strong briefing.

A year ago, I attended a social event at No. 11 Downing Street—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) is impressed. I do occasionally cross the threshold of some esteemed addresses in this country and I may do so again in the future, under the new dispensation—who knows? I am touched by the hon. Lady’s solicitude. On that occasion, I said to the Chancellor that the problems of supported and specialist housing, acute hospital care, adult social care and the interface with local government cannot be solved through salami-slicing or incremental policies. We need a long-term strategic vision of how to address the massive demographic changes that have led to many additional older people needing to be housed.

The Minister is somewhat caught here, because the matter is not really the responsibility of the Department for Communities and Local Government; this is very much a Treasury-driven initiative. He cannot say that, but I can, as a humble Back Bencher. Unfortunately, his Department is caught between Scylla and Charybdis in that it has to continue to develop policy even though long-term thinking has not yet been put in place. The House must be aware that this issue is probably the most important that we face, because we cannot beat the demographic clock. As my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney said, we are undermining our own policies to a certain extent—the policy of oversight from local government of adult social care, health and the transforming care programme.

We certainly need extra time to put a new funding formula in place, but this must not be done on a spatchcock basis. We must think about predicting demographic change and helping local housing associations to deal with that. This is about supported housing for not only older people, but some of the most vulnerable in our society, such as those with special educational needs—

Victoria Borwick (Kensington) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing this debate. I just want to say something briefly about supported housing for vulnerable people, which is exactly what my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) is talking about. This is not just about the country, so I want to bring London back into the equation. If we build these things only out of London, people have to leave their local communities. If we want to keep people within the family environment, it is important that we are able to build these expensive properties in London. The only other point I wish to make is that at the moment we can build them by using section 106 agreements, but if buildings are to become starter homes or will have to be sold off, there will be even less opportunity for councils to provide such housing. I urge the Minister to consider supported housing and this type of accommodation when thinking about what other options are available.

Mr Jackson: My hon. Friend goes to the nub of the issue. We are not talking about fiscal changes regarding general needs housing, which is a separate issue. We understand that there has been a significant increase in the housing benefit bill over the past number of years and we have to reduce that. We are talking here about young people who are fleeing violent backgrounds, women who are fleeing violent partners, and teenagers, children and young adults who have mental health issues—my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney alluded to this point. That situation is different, so the Minister needs to put a case to the Treasury that a much more long-term and sustainable funding regime should be put in place before we go any further.

I mentioned delayed discharge. If only we were in a position to plan these supported housing schemes properly—they are now under threat, as my hon. Friend so eloquently revealed—we would make a net saving. The process might take five or 10 years, but we must consider the number of older people who are admitted to hospital when they do not need to be in acute hospital beds, but instead need appropriate housing to deal with their specific individual needs.

Mr Robin Walker: Does my hon. Friend agree that many elderly people and those with specific conditions might be able to avoid a hospital admission altogether if they had the right supported housing?

Mr Jackson: Absolutely. One of the great pleasures of being a constituency MP is that we get to visit some of these excellent supported housing schemes—these extra care centres—with Friary Court and the Pavilions being two that Axiom Housing Association has in the urban area of Peterborough.

May I allude briefly to the specific concerns that Mr Lewin raised about the impact of these changes in the Peterborough area? He said:

“...Axiom has already felt one of the consequences of the proposed LHA policy—a flagship extra care scheme for 60 vulnerable people at Whittlesey is now on hold as we cannot commit to building these new projects when there is uncertainty surrounding the future revenue funding streams.”

Whittlesey is actually in North East Cambridgeshire, but the point is very reasonable. The policy has a particular impact when low-value land is involved, as is the case in our neighbouring authority of Fenland, although that also applies to other parts of the east of England.

Mr Lewin also mentions the services that are affected, which include young persons’ foyers, homeless hostels, specialist supported housing, extra care housing and sheltered housing. He goes on to detail the “current impact on each of these schemes/projects based on current rents and service charges”.

For instance, the Peterborough Foyer and the Wisbech Foyer, which do a really good job for young people who want to get off benefits, find work, training or internships, and make something of their lives and improve themselves, will face a cumulative loss in annual income of £620,557. He said that our homeless hostels, such as Fairview Court and New Haven, would lose £461,735. The three Peterborough extra care schemes, two of which I have mentioned, will lose £794,704.

Part of the problem is that we do not get a generic service with such specialist housing. We have night porter services for safety and security, which is an enhanced service that has to be paid for. Losses will also vary according to the amount of Supporting People...
money that funds support costs. When there is little such money, the costs are included in the housing benefit element of the service charge, which will now be capped. Mr Lewin goes on to say that the projected lost revenue to Axiom for supported housing is £2.2 million.

Unless the Government have quite an innovative, forward-looking and visionary approach for how else that money can be made up, many of the registered providers that provide this much-needed housing for vulnerable people will find themselves in great difficulty, and that will clearly impact on work in the community and in general needs housing. A local housing association in my constituency, Cross Keys Homes, runs an apprenticeship school, which is a fantastic scheme. There will be a knock-on effect—a cumulative knock-on effect across the country—in terms of how individuals will have to be taken care of if they cannot be housed in the most appropriate way.

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech and I agree with much of what he is saying. Does he agree that if people cannot access services such as Blue Triangle and the ARCH resettlement service in my constituency, they would be out on the streets and in very unsafe situations, because there are literally no other housing providers that will take them?

Mr Jackson: Absolutely. The hon. Lady makes a very good point. There will be consequences if we do not step back.

I did not refer to the new Prime Minister because I want a job, as that is highly unlikely to happen. After 11 years, I am resigned to being a humble spear carrier in the drama of British politics—there has been a lot of drama this week. I did so because a new Government will have new priorities, a new vision and new principles. Housing is massively important, especially general needs housing. I am talking about housing our most vulnerable people, looking after them and getting them off the streets. In many respects, I am inordinately proud of what this Government have done on housing, but I am making my remarks because I do not want them to throw that record away through a short-term action of cutting £100 million here or there and therefore making my remarks because I do not want them to fall on deaf ears.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney for securing this debate. I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) that a considerable number of Members across this House also have significant knowledge of and passion for this important subject. I am particularly pleased to be responding to this debate because we are at a crucial point in our important journey to review and reform the funding of supported housing.

Supported housing plays a crucial role in supporting hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable people in the country. A safe, stable and supportive place to live can be the key to unlocking better outcomes for individuals. For many, it is a stepping-stone to independent living in the longer term, as several colleagues mentioned. One of this Government’s key commitments is to protect the most vulnerable. The provision of supported housing underpins that commitment and helps Departments across Whitehall fulfil their objectives in supporting those most in need and delivering on this promise.

As has rightly been said, the sector supports people across the country, from those with mental health conditions to rough sleepers, people who are homeless, ex-offenders and those escaping domestic violence. It ensures that vulnerable elderly people can maintain their independence for as long as possible and live in safety and security, that those with learning difficulties can live as independently as possible, and that care leavers can safely make the transition to self-reliance. The importance of supported housing cannot be overestimated. Supported housing helps people meet the demands of daily life, it helps people get their lives in order, it improves and supports their health and well-being, and it provides a place of safety and stability where people can achieve independence and reach their full potential.

Grahame M. Morris rose—

Mr Jones: I understand that the hon. Gentleman wants to intervene, but I will heed Mr Speaker’s comments earlier in the debate.

While looking after the most vulnerable in society, we must also ensure that funding for supported housing is efficient, workable, transparent and sustainable, so that it delivers a secure, quality service that provides for those who need it and makes the best use of the money available. Long-term reform of the sector is overdue. Working with and listening to commissioners and providers to date has been invaluable in helping us to envisage what the future might look like, and I see a very positive future where high quality supported housing is there to provide the right support at the right time and for the right length of time, helping those who can move on into work and independence. Services must be outcomes-focused, accountable, planned and responsive to individual and local needs. Our new funding regime must support these goals. The decisions that we make now will lay the foundations for that future.

The roll-out of universal credit provides an opportunity to drive that reform as housing benefit is phased out. Reform of the sector and a new funding regime must be in place for when universal credit is fully rolled out. We think that better services for vulnerable people and value for money go hand in hand. Our reforms must
drive both. We want the quality of services and a focus on outcomes for the people who use them to be at the forefront. We must consider new approaches to transparency and oversight in order to achieve this.

Let me therefore set out what I believe must be the principles for a new long-term funding regime. It must protect the public finances—for the taxpayer, as well as for central and local government. It must also build in a rigorous approach to value for money. At the same time, to protect vulnerable and older people, now and in the future, it must be funded in a way that recognises the increased cost of supporting people in the community, as colleagues on both sides of the Chamber have mentioned.

I also want to ensure that a future funding model provides enough certainty to allow the development of new supported housing units. In particular, an ageing population demands that services and supply keep pace with our social care needs.

Welfare spending cannot be left to spiral out of control. It is also right that people seeking help with their housing costs should not get higher levels of housing benefit for the same property if it is in the social rather than the private rented sector.

However, it is clear that supported housing is different and should be treated differently. The Government recognise the higher costs associated with providing supported housing for vulnerable groups, over and above the costs of general-needs housing. That is why it is crucial, as my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough said, that we work across Government and alongside the sector and other partners to find a workable and sustainable solution.

There has rightly been great interest in this important issue. We have said all along that we wish to hear from a wide spectrum of stakeholders and other partners to ensure that we reflect the diversity of vulnerable people’s needs and the support offer across all the different parts of the sector. I can reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney, who asked about our engagement with the sector, that we constantly engage with it over this important issue, and we have been doing so for some months, because the sector is absolutely part of coming up with a sustainable solution. Having spoken to the sector, I think it recognises that the status quo is not an option, and it is making strong representations, which we are certainly listening to.

As I say, we have been listening to, and working with, providers, umbrella bodies such as the National Housing Federation and the Local Government Association, and local authorities and other local commissioners, as well as those who represent people in need who rely on, and benefit from, supported housing.

Of course, in Scotland and Wales housing is a devolved matter, and UK Government officials have been speaking to their counterparts in the devolved Administrations. That dialogue has been crucial to guiding our thinking on this important issue, and we need to keep talking as we firm up our plans.

I take the opportunity to thank sector bodies and representatives, such as the National Housing Federation, for the extensive engagement and work they have undertaken to consider what the future regime might look like. It is important that we consider all their proposals in detail, continue the conversation we have begun with the sector and other partners, and hear all voices across this diverse sector.

It is clear that supported housing is an investment that brings significant savings to other parts of the public sector, particularly the NHS. At the same time, any loss of provision risks significant disruption to service users, as well as expensive cost-shunting. That is, why earlier this year, we listened carefully to the sector and put in place the one-year exemption. That short-term exemption was welcomed by the sector, but we recognise that it is only a temporary fix, which is why we are looking at a longer-term solution. That solution must work for all parts of the sector. We must make sure that we recognise the diversity in the sector, and we will continue to do that.

I will certainly take into account the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney and colleagues across the Chamber, have made. We look forward to bringing forward a solution to this important issue as soon as is practical.

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones indicated dissent.

Mr Brown: I am sorry—has the Minister sat down? Is he not giving way? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: The Minister says that he has concluded his speech.

Question put and agreed to.

7 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rail Links: Wales and the South-west

1. Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): What assessment the Government have made of the adequacy of rail links between Wales and the south-west. [905783]

Guto Bebb: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, who is well known for his campaigning efforts on behalf of rail commuters. The Government’s investment in the railway infrastructure is at record levels. We are seeing the electrification of the main railway line to Swansea, and we are also seeing great investment in signalling in north Wales. That new capacity will be good for the economy of south Wales and the south-west.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): As the Minister will know, there is more economic connectivity between south Wales and the south-west than there is between south Wales and north Wales. Will he undertake to speed up the electrification of the railways, particularly at a time when Brexit is leading to considerable uncertainty about inward investment in Wales?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman has made a good point about the importance of rail connectivity to economic development, but I do not think it is a case of either/or. I think it is important to have great connections between north and south Wales, but we should also recognise the need for south Wales to be linked with the London area and the south-west, and the same applies to north Wales. As for “speeding up”, I will take no lessons from the Labour party, which failed to invest a single penny in the electrification of any railway line in Wales during a 13-year period.

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): By stark contrast with what was done by the last Government, what this Government are doing for the Great Western line—the electrification, and the new trains—is remarkable. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the provision of direct trains from Cardiff Central station to London to build on that capacity and investment?

Guto Bebb: My hon. Friend is a great champion of railway connections between south Wales and London, and it would be a pleasure to meet him to discuss further developments in a Welsh context. I fully agree that the modernisation and electrification of the south Wales main line will greatly enhance the connectivity between south Wales and London, not least the new link to Heathrow airport.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Improving Cardiff Central station is a vital part of all this. Will the Minister update the House on what recent discussions the Government have had with Cardiff council and others about the modernisation and upgrading of the station?

Guto Bebb: I can confirm that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has met council leaders in Cardiff to discuss the redevelopment of Cardiff Central station. The Government have already invested in enhanced capacity in the form of additional platforms, but the process needs to continue. We recognise the importance of the station to the economy of not just the capital city but the wider economic area that surrounds it, and talks are ongoing.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Plans for future south Wales rail links were heavily dependent on EU cash. Will the Minister ask the Treasury to support rail links such as the metro for the future?
Guto Bebb: The south Wales metro links will clearly be important to the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, but it should be borne in mind that the amount invested in the Cardiff capital region city deal is £1.2 billion, of which less than 8% is currently earmarked as EU funding, and that the Government have already committed £500 million to that development. I think the hon. Gentleman should be talking up the prospects for the economy of south Wales, rather than highlighting the deficiencies that he sees in the current funding arrangements.

EU Referendum: Political Consequences

2. Mr David Jones (Chwyd West) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential consequences for Wales of the outcome of the EU referendum.

Mr Jones: Structural funding for Wales is guaranteed until 2020. Given the substantial budgetary savings that will be made after British withdrawal from the EU, can my right hon. Friend confirm that his office will make every effort to ensure that the current level of funding will continue until at least that date?

Alun Cairns: The Government have a strong record in guaranteeing funds for Wales, most notably the Barnett floor, which was ignored for 13 years by Labour. That demonstrates that we will work hard in prioritising the areas of the UK that rightly need and deserve support.

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Christina Rees: Has the Minister had talks with major employers in Wales such as Ford, Airbus, GE, Toyota and Tata to find out what their investment intentions are following the vote to leave the EU?

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to Wales, especially to the steel industry. There will be an immediate loss of £600 million, and there could be further losses later. The simple question—a one-word answer will do—is this: will he guarantee that under Brexit Wales will not lose any of the funding that it has now?

Alun Cairns: I can guarantee that Wales will get its fair share, through the Barnett floor and all the other means that I have highlighted. My party can give certainty of leadership with a strong visionary negotiating stance as we approach our departure from the European Union. It is quite obvious that we cannot have that certainty of leadership from the Labour party.

Rebalancing the Economy

3. Karen Lumley (Redditch) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of steps taken to rebalance the economy in Wales.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): This Government are taking unprecedented steps to ensure greater and fairer prosperity right across the UK, and the UK Government’s cities and local growth agenda is revolutionising the way in which we achieve this. The signing of the Cardiff capital region city deal, alongside ongoing negotiations in Swansea and early discussions for a north Wales growth deal, is a clear demonstration of our commitment to rebalancing the economy in Wales.

Karen Lumley: Does my hon. Friend agree that, in my old home area of north Wales, good transport links are vital to rebalancing the economy? What plans does he have to achieve that in order to attract more investment?

Guto Bebb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of transport links for economic growth in north Wales. Last Thursday, I was at a summit in north Wales with the Welsh Government economic Minister and local government leaders. We discussed a proposal for improving rail and road links in north Wales as part of the north Wales growth deal.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Central to rebalancing the Welsh economy are the metro projects and the city regions. Given that during the referendum campaign 13 Government Ministers signed a letter guaranteeing the continuation of EU funding, will the Minister ensure that none of those projects loses out as a result of our leaving the EU?

Guto Bebb: I think the hon. Gentleman is asking me to give a guarantee in relation to a future Government. That Government will be established by the new Prime Minister from this afternoon onwards. The key point is that the city deal was an initiative that showed the co-operation between the Westminster Government and the Welsh Government. It showed what could be done when Governments work together. The proposed investment in the south Wales metro is something that was not delivered by the previous Government during the 13-year period in which they could have made a difference.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Given the opportunities of the north Wales growth deal for my constituency and for north-east Wales, what steps is the Minister taking to follow the lead of the Treasury to ensure that women business leaders are fully engaged in the north Wales growth deal?

Guto Bebb: The meetings that we are having in north Wales have been with council leaders, further education leaders and leaders of Welsh businesses, and I am glad to say that they have involved both male and female leaders. The key point is that our approach in north Wales is inclusive and supported by all stakeholders. People realise the potential of north Wales joining the northern powerhouse for the benefit of all the residents of north Wales.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Exports are central to any rebalancing strategy. Unlike the British state, which has a gigantic trade deficit, Wales has a significant trade surplus. It is the best performing component of the UK. What assessment has the Minister made of the number of countries across the world to which Welsh companies export, and the number of trade deals that will therefore have to be renegotiated? Does he not realise that tariff-free access to the single market is vital to the Welsh economy and that—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are grateful to the hon. Gentleman. We have got his drift.

Guto Bebb: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his passionate question. I agree with him that access to the market is important for the Welsh economy, but he should also recognise that the growth in Welsh exports has been faster to countries outside the European Union. We need a balanced approach and to ensure that we have access to markets throughout the world, so that Welsh manufacturing businesses, such as Airbus, can carry on with their recent success.

EU Referendum: Regeneration Projects

5. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the outcome of the EU referendum on regeneration projects in Wales.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): As Secretary of State I am determined to maintain our recent economic success and to ensure that we manage our transition to the new arrangements in a calm and measured way. As we negotiate our way out of the EU, a whole range of decisions will have to be made in due course.

Gerald Jones: The A465—the heads of the valleys road—runs through my constituency and has historically had a bad safety record—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the people of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney at the very least will want to hear the hon. Gentleman.

Gerald Jones: Thank you, Mr Speaker. With EU funds, the road has been mostly turned into a dual carriageway, but some phases of the work have yet to start. Will the Secretary of State assure me that he will do all that he can and work with the Welsh Government to provide support and ensure that that project and many like it will not be jeopardised by Brexit?
Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I underline that we remain full, active members of the EU, with all the benefits and obligations that that brings, for at least two years. The project he highlights is one of the more successful EU-funded projects, but not all of them were as successful but had questionable strategies and woolly outcomes. We need to reassess how we support regional aid programmes.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Can the shadow Secretary of State—sorry, I mean the Secretary of State, who is just a shadow in his own party—give an absolute commitment that no regeneration projects will lose out as a result of the disastrous Brexit result?

Alun Cairns: I can guarantee that for the next two years at least no EU-supported project will lose out. We have of course not yet concluded our negotiating position, and simply replacing one source of funding with another misses the point. The EU referendum sent out a clear message from the communities that are purported to benefit the most from European aid that they simply did not want what was being offered to them.

Tidal Lagoons

6. Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What assessment the Government have made of the potential contribution of tidal lagoons to energy production in Wales.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): Tidal lagoons have the potential to make a significant contribution to the UK energy mix, and exciting projects in Wales such as the Swansea bay lagoon deserve serious consideration. That is why we have commissioned an independent review of tidal lagoons, and I look forward to reading its findings in the autumn.

Neil Parish: The Bristol channel has the second highest tidal rise and fall in the world. We need to harness that power and we can pay for it over a longer period because it will create power for hundreds of years to come.

Guto Bebb: I thank my hon. Friend for his passionate remarks. He is right that that potential exists, and that is why we have commissioned an independent review that will report in the autumn. It needs to look carefully at the costs and benefits of a potential tidal lagoon. We are supportive of the concept, but we have to ensure that we balance the development against the cost to the UK taxpayer.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): As the Minister will know, many renewable energy projects depend on EU funding—[Hon. Members: “Hear, hear!”] Mr Speaker, I did not know I was that popular! Such projects include the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. Will the Minister provide a cast-iron guarantee that the UK Government will meet that funding if it is lost as we exit the EU?

Guto Bebb: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that he is not that popular.

The complex tidal lagoon issue is being considered—we are looking at all the issues. I am not aware of any EU funding that was committed to the tidal lagoon project, so I can offer no guarantees.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): The Hendry review team has met representatives of business and civic society right across Wales. The tidal lagoon infrastructure project is a massive economic opportunity for Wales and my constituency in particular. Will the Minister assure the House that he will emphasise to the Hendry review how much support and enthusiasm there is for this project, and how important it is that this vital scheme is completed as a matter of urgency?

Guto Bebb: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place on the Front Bench. I fully accept the comments made about support for the concept in the Swansea area, and I can confirm that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has already met Charles Hendry to discuss the project. It is not my position to prejudge an independent report, but I assure her that the views of the residents and local authorities in south Wales are known to Charles Hendry.

Farming Sector

7. Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the contribution of the farming sector to the economy in Wales.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): The farming sector is the economic backbone of the Welsh rural economy. The total income from farming in Wales is estimated at more than £175 million, but more important is the contribution that Welsh agriculture makes to our rural communities. It is crucial and this Government will continue to support it.

Mr Speaker: Order. The voice of Montgomeryshire must be heard.

Glyn Davies: Does the Minister share my concerns and those of the Welsh farming unions about the administration of the single farm payment scheme in Wales, particularly in relation to cross-border issues? Will he agree to meet the farming unions at the Royal Welsh show next week to discuss this serious issue?

Guto Bebb: I agree completely with my hon. Friend that any delays in payments to the farming community are problematic. This issue is devolved to the Welsh Government and it is one I have already discussed with farming unions. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be at the Royal Welsh next week, subject to the decisions of the next Prime Minister, and meetings have been arranged with farming unions at that event, which is undoubtedly the premier farming event of the whole United Kingdom.

Carolyn Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North): Welsh, and indeed British, farmers are responsible for producing some of the finest food in the world. Now that we are to leave the EU, what effort is my hon. Friend making to make sure that the Department ensures that all of the UK’s fantastic home-grown produce is promoted to international markets?
Guto Bebb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the quality of food produced in Wales is second to none. We produce the best lamb in the entire world, and the contribution of such produce to the economy is crucial. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have already met business leaders, including food producers, to give them confidence that they can still access international markets following the EU referendum result.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): The Royal Welsh show next week in Builth Wells will indeed show the very best of Welsh agriculture. When the Secretary of State goes there, he will get the same question that I have received in the past few weeks, since 23 June: what guarantees are there that the support for the family farm at its current level will remain in the future to sustain the essential rural economy, in west Wales and more generally?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman is a champion of the agricultural sector—there is no doubt about that. I can assure him, once again, that the Wales Office has already had meetings with the farming unions. We can certainly offer the guarantee that the current funding arrangements will be in place until at least 2018, but the ongoing support for Welsh farming will be subject to agreements involving this Government, the way in which we exit the European Union and the decisions taken by the future Prime Minister.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Given that the common agricultural policy and rural development programme contribute hundreds of millions of pounds to the Welsh rural economy, what UK exit scenario could possibly best serve Wales?

Guto Bebb: As the hon. Lady knows, I argued for Wales and the UK to stay within the EU, but the reality is that Wales voted to leave. It is therefore crucial that we support the industries that are dependent on exporting to the EU. We have a quality product offered by Welsh agriculture, so it is imperative that we talk up that sector, to the best of our abilities. Again, I give assurance to the farming unions that the current funding situation is in place until 2018.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that leaving the European Union offers a golden opportunity to assess the level of subsidy paid to farming in Wales to see whether that money can be more effectively and efficiently spent in other areas?

Guto Bebb: We need to look at the way in which Government spend money. If there is to be a funding mechanism in the future for Welsh agriculture, it must be looked at in the totality of Government spending. However, it is pretty important to state that more than 60,000 jobs in Wales are dependent on the agriculture sector, and it would be short-sighted in the extreme for any Government to turn their back on a sector that puts Wales on the international map.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [905833] Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 13 July.

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): I know that the whole House will join me in congratulating Andy Murray, Heather Watson, Jordanne Whiley, Gordon Reid and Alfie Hewett on their stunning success at Wimbledon.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. Other than one meeting this afternoon with Her Majesty the Queen, the diary for the rest of my day is remarkably light.

Danny Kinahan: May I echo the Prime Minister’s congratulations to Andrew Murray and all the other winners? We thank the Prime Minister for all his hard work and his leadership—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear”! ]—particularly his commitment to the Union and to Northern Ireland, visiting it often and swimming in Lough Erne. Perhaps he would like to come and swim in Lough Neagh. The Ulster Unionist party looks forward to working with the next Prime Minister. I am told that there are lots of leadership roles out there at the moment—there is the England football team and “Top Gear”. Even across the Big Pond, there is a role that needs filling. I will if I may go into my pet subject.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): In your own time, Danny.

Danny Kinahan: Thank you.

Brexit really threatens the Union. Will the Prime Minister work with his successors to ensure that we have somebody that will pull together all the countries of the Union and the overseas territories so that we can all work and thrive together?

The Prime Minister: Let me thank the hon. Gentleman. For his kind remarks and fascinating suggestions for future jobs, most of which sound even harder than this one, so I think I’ll pass. I believe that Northern Ireland is stronger than it was six years ago—58,000 more people in work, the full devolution of justice and home affairs delivered under this Government, the Saville report published, record inward investment and the creation of new jobs. Like him, I care passionately about our United Kingdom, as do all of us in this House. We need to make sure that, as we leave the European Union, we work out how to keep the benefits of the common travel area. Hard work is being done now with civil servants in Northern Ireland, Whitehall and the Republic of Ireland, and the pace of that work needs to quicken.

Q4. [905836] Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for all the hard work that he has done leading this great country for the past few years.
My right hon. Friend’s lasting legacy will include supporting the Kurds whose peshmerga are bravely fighting Daesh in all our interests. Having visited the peshmerga on the frontline, I know that our airstrikes, weapons and training are crucial, but peshmerga injuries could be reduced with additional equipment such as body armour, respirators and front-line medical facilities, and we possibly could provide some beds in our specialist hospital in Birmingham to the most seriously injured. Does he agree that that is a relatively small investment that would make a huge difference to our allies in our common fight to defeat the evil of terrorism?

The Prime Minister: First, I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. He is absolutely right that the Kurds are incredibly brave fighters and are doing valuable work against Daesh in Iraq and Syria. I will look carefully at his suggestion of using the Birmingham hospital. The Queen Elizabeth Hospital has excellent facilities for battlefield casualties. Our Army is already providing medical instruction to the peshmerga to help them deal with the situation, but we will look to see whether more can be done. Let us be frank, the strategy is working. Daesh is on the back foot: it has lost 45% of the territory that it once held in Iraq; its finances have been hit; more than 25,000 Daesh fighters have now been killed; desertion has increased; and the flow of foreign fighters has fallen by 90%. I have always said that this will take a long time to work in Iraq and Syria, but we must stick at it and we must stay the course.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): May I start by joining the Prime Minister in paying tribute to the British winners at Wimbledon—Andy Murray, Heather Watson, Jordanne Whiley, Alfie Hewett and Gordon Reid? Also, I think it would be nice if we congratulated Serena Williams on her fantastic achievement.

It is only right that after his six years as Prime Minister, we thank the right hon. Gentleman for his service. I have often disagreed with him, but some of his achievements I welcome and want to recognise today. One is helping to secure the release of Shaker Aamer from Guantanamo Bay; another is legislating to achieve equal marriage in our society. I am sure he would like to acknowledge that it was Labour votes that helped him to get the legislation through. Will he express some concern at the way that homelessness has risen in this country for the past six years and looks like it is going to continue to rise?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. I join him in paying tribute to Serena Williams, who has now overtaken Steffi Graf’s amazing record of 22 grand slams.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for what he said about Shaker Aamer. That was a case that this Government raised again and again with the US Government, and we are pleased that it has been resolved. I thank him also for what he said about equal marriage. There are 30,000 gay people in our country who, in the past six years, have been able to get married. That is real progress. I will never forget the day at No. 10 when one of the people who works very close to the front door said to me, “I’m not that interested in politics, Mr Cameron, but because of something your lot have done, I am able to marry the person I’ve loved all my life this weekend.” There are many amazing moments in this job, but that was one of my favourites.

As for homelessness, it is still 10% below the peak that we saw under Labour, but the key is building more homes. We have built 700,000 homes since I became Prime Minister, but now we need to quicken the pace of that. The key to building more homes is, yes, programmes such as Help to Buy; yes, the reforms to the planning system, but the absolute key is a strong economy.

Jeremy Corbyn: I have been listening carefully to what the Home Secretary has been saying over the past few days. She said:

“It’s harder than ever for young people to buy their first house.”

Does the Prime Minister think that is because of record low house building or his Government’s apparent belief that £450,000 is an affordable price for a starter home?

The Prime Minister: First, let me say at the Dispatch Box how warmly I congratulate the Home Secretary on becoming leader of the Conservative party. When it comes to women Prime Ministers, I am very pleased to be able to say that pretty soon it is going to be 2:0, and not a pink bus in sight.

On the issue of housing and homelessness, as I said, 700,000 homes have been delivered. The right hon. Gentleman asked about affordability, which is key. When I became Prime Minister, because of what had happened to the mortgage market, a first-time buyer often needed to have as much as £30,000 to put down a deposit. Because of the combination of Help to Buy and shared ownership, some people are able to get on the housing ladder now with a deposit of as little as £2,000. With the low mortgage rates and the new houses we are building, we are making good progress.

Jeremy Corbyn: The malaise seems a little deeper still. The Home Secretary said, talking of the economy, “so that it really does work for everyone. Because it is apparent to anybody who is in touch with the real world that people do not feel our economy works that way”.

Is she not right that too many people in too many places in Britain feel that the economy has been destroyed in their towns because the industries have gone, there are high levels of unemployment or under-employment, and a deep sense of malaise? Do not we all need to address that?

The Prime Minister: If we are going to talk about the economic record, let us get the facts straight. We have cut the deficit by two thirds. There are 2.5 million more people in work in our country. There are almost a million more businesses, and 2.9 million people in relative poverty and 100,000 fewer children are in relative poverty. If I am accused of sloth in delivery by the right hon. Gentleman, let us take the past week. We have both been having leadership elections. We got on with it. We have had resignation, nomination, competition and coronation. The Opposition have not even decided what the rules are yet. If they ever got into power, it would take them about a year to work out who would sit where.
Jeremy Corbyn: Democracy is an exciting and splendid thing, and I am enjoying every moment of it.

Talking of the economy, the Home Secretary said that many people “find themselves exploited by unscrupulous bosses”—I cannot imagine who she was referring to. In his hand-over discussions with the Home Secretary, could the Prime Minister enlighten us as to whether there is any proposal to take on agency Britain by banning zero-hours contracts, clamping down on umbrella companies, repealing the Trade Union Act 2016 or, preferably, all three?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right that democracy is a splendid thing—I have to agree with him about that. Let me answer very directly on exploitation in the workplace. It is this Government that, for the first time, has introduced a national living wage—that is a huge change. It is this Government that has massively increased the power of the Gangmasters Licensing Authority. There are record fines for businesses that do not pay the minimum wage, and there is much more policing and many more prosecutions taking place. All of those things have changed under this Government. As for zero-hours contracts, they account for fewer than one in 40 people in work. Some 60% of people on zero-hours contracts do not want to work more hours. It was this Government that did something the Labour party never did, which was to ban exclusive zero-hours contracts for the first three years of Labour government, but it took a coalition Conservative Government to do it.

Let me say something to the right hon. Gentleman about the democratic process of leadership elections, because I did say a couple of weeks ago—I have to say that I am beginning to admire his tenacity. He is reminding me of the Black Knight in “Monty Python and the Holy Grail”. He has been kicked so many times, but he says, “Keep going, it’s only a flesh wound.” I admire that.

Jeremy Corbyn: I would like the Prime Minister to address another issue that the House voted on last week. I have a question from Nina—[Interruption.] I have to say that I am beginning to admire his tenacity. He is reminding me of the Black Knight in “Monty Python and the Holy Grail”. He has been kicked so many times, but he says, “Keep going, it’s only a flesh wound.” I admire that.

The Prime Minister: Let me reassure Nina that there is absolutely no chance of that happening to someone in those circumstances. We are working hard to do what we want, which is to give a guarantee to EU citizens that they will have their rights respected—all those who have come to this country. The only circumstance in which I could ever envisage a future Government trying to undo that guarantee would be if British citizens in other European countries did not have their rights respected. I think it is important to have reciprocity. The new Prime Minister will be working to give that guarantee as fast as we can.

I am glad the right hon. Gentleman mentions emails, because, actually, I have an email as well. I got this—I am not making this up. I promise—on 16 September 2015 from someone called Judith, and she said this: “Please, please keep dignity, and not triumphalism during the first PMQs today with Jeremy Corbyn.”

She gave this reason: “Tom Watson, who may oust Jeremy Corbyn…is a very different kettle of fish. He is experienced, organised and far more dangerous in the long run.”

She goes on: “Sensible, sober, polite answers to Mr Corbyn…let him create his own party disunity.”

After this is over, I have got to find Judith and find out what on earth happens next.

Jeremy Corbyn: I have had the pleasure of asking the Prime Minister 179 questions—[HON. MEMBERS: “More!”] Thank you. There are plenty more to come to his successor—don’t worry about that.

Before I ask the Prime Minister my last question, could I just put on record that I wish him well as he leaves office? I also wish his family well—Samantha and their children. We should all recognise that while many of us really do enjoy our jobs and our political life, it is the loved ones nearest to us and our families who actually make enormous sacrifices so that we may be able to do this. I would also like to pass on my thanks to his mum for her advice about ties, suits and songs. It is extremely kind of her, and I would be grateful if he would pass that on to her personally. I am reflecting on the lesson that she offered.

I have one rumour that I want the Prime Minister to deal with. There is a rumour going round that his departure has been carefully choreographed so that he can slip seamlessly into the vacancy on “Strictly” that was created this morning by Len Goodman’s departure. Is that his next career?

The Prime Minister: I do not really have a pasa doble, so I can promise that that is not the case.

Let me thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks and good wishes to my amazing wife Samantha and my lovely children, who are all watching from the Gallery today. He is absolutely right: the pressure in these jobs often bears hardest on those we love around us. Let me send my best wishes to his family as well.

I have done a bit of research, Mr Speaker. I have addressed 5,500 questions from this Dispatch Box; I will leave it for others to work out how many I have answered. Because of your belief in letting everyone have their say, I think I have done a record 92 hours of statements from this Dispatch Box, as well as some very enjoyable Liaison Committee appearances and other things.

I will certainly send the right hon. Gentleman’s best wishes back to my mother. He seems to have taken her advice and is looking absolutely splendid today.

This gives me the opportunity to put a rumour to rest, as well—it is even more serious than the “Strictly Come Dancing” one. The right hon. Gentleman will
appreciate this because El Gato, his cat, is particularly famous. This is the rumour that somehow I do not love Larry; I do, and I have photographic evidence to prove it. Sadly, I cannot take Larry with me; he belongs to the house and the staff love him very much, so do I.

Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that in 33 years in this House watching five Prime Ministers and several ex-Prime Ministers, I have seen him achieve a mastery of that Dispatch Box unparalleled in my time? That is not just because of his command of detail and his wit, but because he commands the respect of friend and foe alike, who know that he is driven not just by legitimate political ambitions and ideas, but by a sense of duty that always leads him to try to make this country more prosperous, more solvent, more tolerant, more fair, and more free. He will command the respect of generations to come.

The Prime Minister: Those words mean a lot from my right hon. Friend, who has spent so much time in this House. It is a special place. I think Prime Minister’s questions, for all its theatrics, does have a purpose, because it is a time when every week the Prime Minister has to know absolutely everything that is going on in Whitehall. Often you find out things that you want to stop pretty quickly before 12 o’clock on a Wednesday. I believe that politics is about public service in the national interest, and that is what I have always tried to do.

This session does have some admirers around the world. I remember when I was doing the Leader of the Opposition’s job and I met Mayor Bloomberg in New York. We walked down the street and everyone knew Mike Bloomberg. Everyone came up and said, “Mayor, you’re doing a great job.” No one had a clue who I was, until eventually someone said, “Hey, Cameron. Prime Minister’s questions—we love your show!”

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): I join the Prime Minister and the leader of the Labour party in paying tribute to all the winners at Wimbledon.

This week we mark the 21st anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide. As this is one of the few political causes that the Prime Minister and I both wholeheartedly support, I hope he will impress on his successor the importance of supporting the Remembering Srebrenica organisation and all the good work that it does across the UK.

Notwithstanding our differences, I genuinely extend my best personal wishes to the Prime Minister and his family; I wish them all the best. However, the Prime Minister’s legacy will undoubtedly be that he has brought us to the brink of being taken out of the European Union, so we on these Benches will not be applauding his premiership. What advice has he given his successor on taking Scotland out of the EU against the wishes of Scottish voters?

The Prime Minister: First, let me join the right hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to all those who lost their lives in Srebrenica. We should make sure that we commemorate the event properly every year. This year there will be a service in the Foreign Office, where commemoration will be given and testimony read out. We should think of it alongside the terrible events of modern history such as the holocaust. This also reminds us that while, as we often debate in this House, there is a price for intervention, there is also sometimes a price from non-intervention. We should remember that.

In terms of what the right hon. Gentleman says about Scotland, the United Kingdom and Europe, my advice to my successor, who is a brilliant negotiator, is that we should try to be as close to the European Union as we can be for the benefits of trade, co-operation and security. The channel will not get any wider once we leave the European Union, and that is the relationship we should seek. That would be good for the United Kingdom and good for Scotland.

Angus Robertson: The Prime Minister’s successor is very well known in Scotland at present—this is across all the front pages—because of the threat to deport the very much loved and liked Brain family from the highlands. The first vote of her premiership is likely to be on imposing Trident against the wishes of almost every single MP from Scotland. Meanwhile, she says that she plans to plough on with Brexit, regardless of the fact that Scotland voted to remain in the EU. How does the outgoing Prime Minister think that all that will go down in Scotland?

The Prime Minister: First of all, specifically on the Brain family, Mrs Brain came to this country on a tier 4 student visa to study for a Scottish history degree. She completed it and her husband and son came as dependants. We have given them an extension until 1 August to put in an application for a work visa in the normal way, and I very much hope that will happen.

On Trident, there will be a vote in this House. It is right that this House should decide. Actually, many people in Scotland support our nuclear deterrent, maintaining it and the jobs that come in Scotland.

The right hon. Gentleman asks about the record of this Government when it comes to Scotland. I will tell him what it is: 143,000 more people in work in Scotland; massive investment in the renewable industries in Scotland; the two biggest warships in our history built in Scotland; a powerhouse Parliament; a referendum that was legal, decisive and fair; and, I might add, a Scotsman winning Wimbledon twice while I was Prime Minister. Never mind Indy 2; I think it is time for Andy 2.

Q7. [905839] Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for the leadership he has shown, particularly in his support of women in the Conservative party. The Prime Minister’s legacy for me, however, and for fellow cancer survivors, is the personal support that he has shown for the cancer drugs fund. Today I ask him to show the same support for those who have been affected by contaminated blood. Will he please update the House as to whether they, too, will have a legacy?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for what she says about the cancer drugs fund, which has helped many people and families in our country. She is absolutely right to raise the issue of contaminated blood, and I can today announce that we will spend the extra £125 million that we have identified. A much fairer and more comprehensive scheme will guarantee that all those infected will, for the first time, receive a regular annual payment. That will include all those with hepatitis stage 1,
who will now receive £3,500 per year, rising to £4,500 per year by the end of the Parliament. For those with hepatitis C at stage 2 or HIV, or who are co-infected with both, annual payments will increase over the lifetime of the Parliament, and we will enhance the support for those who have been bereaved and those who will be in future, significantly boosting the money for the discretionary payments. Last year I apologised to the victims on behalf of the British Government for something that should never have happened. Today I am proud to provide them with the support that they deserve.

Although it is not right to pick out two individuals, I think that people should know that they can come to constituency surgeries, make their point to their Member of Parliament and campaign, as these sufferers have done. In my case, David Leadbetter and Matthew Davies repeatedly came to my surgery, saying, “This mustn’t stand. More must be done.” I know that not everyone will be fully satisfied with what is being done, but it does show our democracy working and compassion in replying to this terrible problem.

Q2. [905834] Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Prime Minister came to office promising to keep the UK’s triple A rating, to end top-down NHS reorganisations and to stop his party bashing on about Europe. How would he say that has gone?

The Prime Minister: On the economic record, 2.5 million more jobs, the deficit cut by two thirds, 2.9 million apprenticeships, a million more businesses, and a growth rate that has been at the top of the developed world are all because of the choices that we made. Because we did that, we have been able to back our NHS with a 10% funding increase, which is more than £10 billion in real terms in this Parliament. As for Europe, we have to settle these issues. It is right that, when trying to settle a really big constitutional issue, you not just rely on Parliament, but ask the people as well. We made a promise and we kept a promise.

Q12. [905844] Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I am very sorry that this turns out to be my last question to the Prime Minister. I want to thank him for everything he has done for my constituency, where every school is now good or outstanding and the jobless total is down 64% since he took office. As he prepares to leave Downing Street, I encourage him to return to the big society agenda that I know he is so passionate about. Does he remember saying, shortly before becoming Prime Minister, that politicians are a mixture of egotism and altruism, and that “you just hope that the” right one “wins out and that people do the right thing rather than the politically convenient thing”?

It seems to me that he has stayed on the right side of that divide in the past six years, not least in the manner of his departure. I think that this country is going to miss him a great deal.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. When it comes to education, there is a very strong record to build on. We have 1.4 million more children in good or outstanding schools than in 2010. We have seen the free school movement really take off, with over 300 free schools open. I visited one yesterday that is outstanding, as a quarter of them are, which is an amazing record when we think how little time they have had to get going. I think that we should build on that record.

As for the big society, yes, we should use a stronger economy to build a bigger and stronger society. One thing we are doing is introducing the National Citizen Service. Some 200,000 young people have taken part in that programme and I hope that, by the end of this Parliament, it will be the norm for 16-year-olds to take part. We talk about the soft skills that are necessary to give people real life chances. Many people do not get those chances, and the National Citizen Service will help them.

Q3. [905835] Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the courteous way he has always answered the questions I have managed to ask him. I have always listened carefully to his answers but, until I had two eye operations, I was not able to see him very clearly. Is he as concerned as I am about newspaper reports that people who are not entitled to NHS cataract operations are jumping the queue and preventing people who are entitled to NHS operations from having that treatment?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. I try to answer questions from this Dispatch Box, but it is difficult sometimes when I have not seen the specific story, and I have not in this case. I recall from previous occasions that we are still investing in cataract operations and that the number of people receiving them is going up. However, I will look carefully—this afternoon—at the question he asks about the danger of queue jumping and get back to him.

Q13. [905845] Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Under the leadership of my right hon. Friend, unemployment in my constituency has dropped from 5.1% in May 2010 to 1.9% in May this year. That is a record to be proud of and one for which I would like to thank him. Does he agree that that has been possible only thanks to his firm focus on jobs, apprenticeships, skills, a strong economy and investment?

The Prime Minister: The figures are remarkable—when a constituency gets to an unemployment rate of 1.9%, that is very close to full employment. We had 2.4 million apprenticeships in the previous Parliament, and there are already an extra 500,000 in this Parliament, taking us towards the target of 3 million in this Parliament. I am confident that we can achieve that target if we work hard. These are not just numbers on a page; they are real people who have experience of the workplace, who are learning a trade and who are taking their first steps in their career. What I want is that, when they get that career, we not only have the national living wage, but make sure that people do not start paying income tax until they are earning a good wage. We have taken 4 million of the lowest paid people in our country out of income tax altogether—that is a record to be proud of.

Q5. [905837] Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): This week is Black Country Week. Yesterday, black country manufacturers were in Parliament demonstrating the high-quality products that are exported...
worldwide. Will the outgoing Prime Minister impress on the incoming Prime Minister the huge importance of maintaining access to the EU single market during Brexit negotiations so that we can maximise the black country’s contribution to exports, productivity and jobs?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. We have seen in the west midlands 173,000 more people in work under this Government. We have seen something of a renaissance in manufacturing, particularly in the automotive sector, some of which is, indeed, in the black country. It is vital for that industry that we have proper access to the single market. I think he is right; this is one of the things we absolutely have to focus on. I want these high-quality automotive and aerospace manufacturing firms to go from strength to strength in our country, and making sure we get that access to Europe is going to be vital.

Q15. [905847] Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): Ten years ago today, I was applying to become the Conservative parliamentary candidate for Labour-held Worcester as my right hon. Friend. Friend was uniting the then Opposition and preparing them for government. Like many Conservative Members, I entered this House in the week when he became Prime Minister. Since that time, unemployment in Worcester has halved and apprenticeships have doubled. We have more good and outstanding schools, and are beginning to receive fairer funding. Wages are up and taxes are down. May I thank my right hon. Friend for all his service to our nation and for the legacy of improved life chances that he will leave behind?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. We have seen unemployment fall in all these constituencies and the claimant count going down. More importantly, we now see 450,000 fewer children in households in which nobody works. Think of the effect this will leave behind?

Q8. [905840] Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Between broken vows, Brexit and the likely renewal of weapons of mass destruction on the Clyde, the Prime Minister has done more for Scottish independence than many SNP Members could ever hope to do. As he contemplates a move to Aberdeenshire, will he now make his commitment to Scottish independence official by visiting snp.org/joinus?

The Prime Minister: What I say to the hon. Lady, and indeed to all SNP Members, is that when Lord Smith himself says that the vow to create a powerhouse Parliament was kept, the SNP should pay attention to that, and recognise that a promise was made and a promise was delivered. I have talked many times at this Dispatch Box about creating this powerhouse Parliament; what I have not seen is the SNP using any of the powers that it now has.

Mr Speaker: Finally, Mr Kenneth Clarke.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): May I first join with all who have thanked the Prime Minister for the statesmanlike leadership that he has given to our party and to the country for the past six years? I thank him particularly for the debating eloquence and also the wit and humour that he has always brought to Prime Minister’s questions on Wednesdays. Although, no doubt, he will have plans for a slightly more enjoyable and relaxed Wednesday morning and lunchtime in the future, may I ask that he will nevertheless still be an active participant in this House as it faces a large number of problems over the next few years? As no two people know what Brexit means at the moment, we need his advice and statesmanship as much as we ever have.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his very kind remarks. I remember that one of the toughest conversations I had in politics was when I was Leader of the Opposition and I was trying to get him to join my Front Bench. He was on a bird-watching holiday in Patagonia; it was almost impossible to persuade him to come back.

Not many people know this, but my right hon. and learned Friend’s first act as Chancellor of the Exchequer was to fire me as a special adviser. I am proud of the fact that one of my first acts was to appoint him to my Cabinet in the coalition Government. The then Deputy Prime Minister will join me in saying that my right hon. and learned Friend provided great wisdom, thoughtfulness and ballast at a time of national difficulty with the advice that he gave us. He is not always the easiest person to get hold of—Tory modernisation has never quite got as far as getting Ken Clarke to carry a mobile phone. He did briefly have one, but he said, “The problem is that people keep ringing me on it.” In opposition, I seem to remember that we had to move our morning meeting to accommodate his 9 o’clock cigar.

I will watch these exchanges from the Back Benches. I will miss the roar of the crowd and I will miss the barbs from the Opposition, but I will be willing you on. When I say “willing you on”, I do not just mean willing on the new Prime Minister at this Dispatch Box, or indeed just willing on the Government Front Bench and defending the manifesto that I helped to put together. I mean willing all of you on, because people come here with huge passion for the issues they care about and with great love for the constituencies that they represent. I will also be willing on this place. Yes, we can be pretty tough, and we test and challenge our leaders—perhaps more than some other countries—but that is something we should be proud of, and we should keep at it. I hope that you will all keep at it, and I shall will you on as you do.

The last thing I would say is that you can achieve a lot of things in politics and get a lot of things done; in the end, public service and the national interest is what it is all about. Nothing is really impossible if you put your mind to it. After all, as I once said, I was the future once. [Applause.]

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. I will come to the hon. Lady—how could I forget her? Her point of order will be heard, but we will first deal with the presentation of Bills.
BILLS PRESENTED

Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act 1847 (Amendment)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Craig Mackinlay, supported by Sir Roger Gale, Caroline Lucas, Paul Scully, James Cleverly, Martin Vickers, Mr David Nuttall, Kelly Tolhurst and Craig Tracey, presented a Bill to amend section 33 of the Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act 1847 to allow local authorities to proscribe, in certain circumstances, the transport of live animals for slaughter abroad via facilities that local authorities control and operate; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 November, and to be printed (Bill 52).

UK Environmental Protection (Maintenance of EU Standards)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Geraint Davies, supported by Mary Creagh, Caroline Lucas, Kerry McCarthy, Mr Mark Williams, Liz Saville Roberts, Chris Stephens, Margaret Greenwood, Sir Alan Meale, Dr Rosena Allin-Khan, Liz McInnes and Gill Furniss, presented a Bill to make provision about the safeguarding of standards of environmental protection derived from European Union legislation, including for water, air, soil, flood protection, and climate change, after the withdrawal of the UK from the EU; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be a Second time on Friday 28 October, and to be printed (Bill 53).

Point of Order

12.40 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In light of the Prime Minister's announcement during Prime Minister's Question Time about financial support for people who received contaminated blood from the NHS in years gone by, would it be in order for you, Mr Speaker, to seek a Minister to come to the House to give further details? Many Members from all parts of the House have been concerned about the issue for many years. It is welcome that the Prime Minister said the Government have reached a conclusion and will now bring forward and implement proposals, but it would be very helpful for all Members to have an opportunity to question a Health Minister on the actual implications of what has been announced today. I understand that a Minister has indicated, in an email sent to me at 12.26 pm today, that she intends to make a written statement to the House tomorrow. However, in light of the overwhelming interest in all parts of the House, a Minister appearing at the Dispatch Box would be much more helpful to Members of Parliament.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. She has devoted close attention to this issue and raised it many times in the House, not least, if memory serves me correctly, on 26 March 2015, to give but one example. I think it is only fair to say to her that tomorrow is likely to be heavily subscribed, being the second day of the two-day debate on the Iraq inquiry, so I suspend judgment on whether tomorrow is necessarily the best day for the purpose. However, I am happy to say to her that from my vantage point, and knowing the extent and breadth of interest in the issue across the House, I think it would show a sensitivity to parliamentary feeling if there were an oral statement, rather than merely a written statement. I hope that that is helpful and constitutes an answer in the mind of the hon. Lady.
National Health Service

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.42 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a bill to re-establish the Secretary of State’s legal duty as to the National Health Service in England and to make provision about the other duties of the Secretary of State in that regard; to make provision about the administration and accountability of the National Health Service in England; to repeal section 1 of the National Health Service (Private Finance) Act 1997, sections 38 and 39 of the Immigration Act 2014 and Part 9 of the Health and Social Care Information Act 2012; to make provision about the application of international law in relation to health services in the United Kingdom; and for connected purposes.

It is a privilege to have the opportunity to present this Bill to the House. I pay tribute to the many patients, nurses, doctors, trade unions and campaigners across the country who have been working tirelessly to combat the privatisation of our national health service. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for the work that they have done.

The Bill is intended to fully restore the NHS as an accountable public service by reversing marketisation in the NHS, abolishing the purchaser-provider split, ending contracting, re-establishing public bodies and making public services accountable to local communities. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 provided the framework for the privatisation of the NHS, and we are seeing that privatisation happen at pace. I believe that the Act brought in three core changes that are driving that privatisation. First, it removed the legal duty on the Secretary of State for Health to provide and secure a comprehensive national health service in England. Secondly, it included a requirement to put NHS contracts out to competitive tender in the free market, putting the profit motive at the heart of the service. Thirdly, it allowed NHS hospitals to make up to 49% of their money out of private patients.

The Bill makes the case for a planned, managed health service. It would reinstate the duty of the Health Secretary, lost under the 2012 Act, to provide a secure and comprehensive NHS. That is important because, under the current arrangements, clinical commissioning groups do not have to serve a particular geographic area and are not required to tend to all illnesses and conditions. In some areas, certain treatments, such as hip and knee replacements and cataract operations, are already being rationed. Reinstating the Secretary of State’s duty is vital to provide the Government accountability needed to maintain a comprehensive NHS.

The 2012 Act forces NHS contracts out to competitive tender in the marketplace, allowing private companies to cherry-pick NHS services from which they can make money. Since 2012, we have seen the effect of NHS contracts going to private companies—it undermines NHS services and the pay and conditions of staff and fragments the service. The sums of money involved are eye-watering. The Government would have us believe that only 6% of contracts go to private firms, but according to the NHS Support Federation, private firms won 36.8% of contracts in 2014-15, securing £3.54 billion of the £9.628 billion of deals awarded.

Does that matter? I say yes, absolutely, without question. Contracting out is very expensive. In the USA, the cost accounts for about 30% of healthcare expenditure, compared with 5% in the non-marketised NHS pre-1990. Any private company has a duty to generate profit for shareholders, but the money we pay through our taxes should be spent on patient care and should not go to shareholders. Putting healthcare contracts out to competitive tender means money being spent on marketing and contract lawyers that could be spent on patients. A proliferation of providers also means a proliferation of administrative costs and opens up opportunities for fraud.

The only way the private sector can reduce costs is ultimately by cutting quality, which might happen by a number of means—for example, by cutting the pay and terms and conditions of health service staff or by selling off nationally owned assets. As a nation, we hold our doctors, nurses and other NHS staff in high esteem, and it is important that we protect their pay and conditions. The Bill therefore includes a requirement for the use of national terms and conditions of employment for relevant NHS staff under the NHS Staff Council and its “Agenda for Change” system. It also includes provisions aimed at preventing the application of competition law and procurement rules to the NHS. It would abolish Monitor, the sector regulator that licenses health service providers and oversees the operation of procurement, choice and competition rules in the health service, and it would repeal sections of the 2012 Act relating to procurement, competition, tariff pricing and health special administration.

Under the 2012 Act, NHS hospitals can make up to 49% of their money from private patients. How they make it is up to them, but the startling fact is that they can do it. They can choose to devote 49% of patient beds to private patients, 49% of theatre time to private patients or 49% of consultants’ time to private patients—and absolutely nobody voted for it. It was in neither the Conservative party’s nor the Liberal Democrats’ manifesto, yet they went ahead and passed legislation to make it happen. That is nothing short of a national scandal. I ask hon. Members to reflect on what it would mean for their constituents if their hospital made such choices. How soon could that happen? In some places, it is happening already. The Royal Marsden hospital now makes 26%—over a quarter—of its money from private patients.

I turn to the NHS financial crisis, which we are all aware of, which is particularly notable in our hospitals and which is accelerating at a frightening pace. NHS trusts in England have recorded a deficit of £2.45 billion for 2015-16—the biggest overspend in the history of the NHS, nearly three times that of the preceding year and more than 20 times the 2013-14 deficit. Three in four hospitals predict that they will be in deficit this year, and the financial crisis is also having an impact on the delivery of care. In those circumstances, it is not difficult to see how hospital managers might feel that increasing the number of private patients they treat in order to generate more income is one of the few options open to them.

We can also look at the recent arrival of sustainability transformation plans to see the bigger picture. England has been divided into 44 areas, each of which is required to come up with an STP. The first priority for the STP is that CCGs and providers must cut expenditure, stay
within budget for 2016-17 and continue to do so for the next four years in order to be entitled to access centrally controlled transformation funding. They will face tough choices—they could sell assets, cut services, ration services or actually charge for services. In that landscape, we can expect to see hospitals taking private patients to generate extra cash, putting NHS patients at the back of the queue.

Doubtless the Government would argue that hospitals will be able to reinvest the money earned from private patients, but that argument does not stack up. If we cut 49% of resources from NHS patients, waiting times will grow and the quality of service will decline. We will see the emergence of a two-tier health service: first-rate for those with the money to pay, but NHS patients receiving a much diminished service. The concept of a comprehensive service free at the point of use will be lost within a generation, and we will all face the real possibility of having to buy health insurance, just as people do in America.

Let us remind ourselves that these hospitals are ours. They have been paid for out of our taxes and are run by our NHS staff—they are not the Government’s to give away. This Bill addresses that and would remove the right of NHS hospitals to make 49% of their money out of private patients.

We will not be able to manage our NHS properly until we address the issue of social care. We are all aware of how important that is. Why should we settle for an NHS that is free to all who need it unless they are elderly or have complex needs? The Bill provides an opportunity to change that. It would give the Secretary of State a duty to exercise his functions with a view to ensuring that we have a much more efficient and cost-effective NHS.

The Bill would also provide for the transfer of financial obligations on NHS private finance initiative agreements to the Treasury, which would also be required to assess and publish those obligations. That would improve public health, stop the privatisation of the NHS and return it to its founding principles. It would remove competition and the profit motive as the drivers of policy and replace them with the public service ethos that has been the hallmark of the NHS since its foundation. The NHS is currently on life support, and the public, patients and NHS staff know it. The Bill provides an viable alternative. The NHS was 68 years old last week; we need to make sure it is there for all who need it for the next 68 years, too.

12.52 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I rise to oppose the Bill, which is wholly based on a false premise. The hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) said that the Bill was necessary to stop the privatisation of the NHS. Well, the privatisation of the NHS is not occurring, so going by her own words, the Bill is completely unnecessary.

The hon. Lady laid the blame for the so-called privatisation of the NHS on the Health and Social Care Act 2012, and she thinks that repealing that Act will therefore solve the problem of what she describes as the privatisation of the NHS. The hon. Lady, who cannot seem to be bothered to listen to the debate, even though it is about her Bill, might have acknowledged that the so-called privatisation of the NHS started long before the 2012 Act. In fact, it gathered pace during the time of the last Labour Government.

If we look at the figures for expenditure on private providers, we see that from a near standing start under the Labour Government, the amount of the total NHS resource expenditure going to private providers grew much more rapidly under the Labour Government than it has under this Government. The increase in resources going to those providers has actually slowed down; it is much slower than it was. It was the hon. Lady’s party that introduced the private sector into the NHS and allowed private sector providers to provide NHS treatment.

I welcome that, as it happens. I do not see it as a bad thing. If my constituents need hospital treatment on the NHS, they have usually had to go to either the Bradford Royal infirmary, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), or to Airedale hospital, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Kris Hopkins). However, under the current provisions, whereby the NHS can allow private providers to supply services, my constituents can now go to the Yorkshire Clinic in my constituency for high-quality treatment. They are served much closer to their homes, and their treatment is still free at the point of need.

As far as I am concerned, that is the essential founding principle of the NHS that must be preserved—that treatment is free at the point of need. That is what matters to people. That is what they want when they need healthcare treatment—free, high-quality healthcare at the point of need, at a location that is convenient for them and convenient for their family members to visit. Whether that is carried out at an NHS hospital or a private hospital is neither here nor there, as long as they are getting treatment free of charge at the point of need. My constituents have benefited greatly from being able to have treatment at the Yorkshire Clinic rather than having to go to one of the NHS hospitals outside my constituency.

The last Labour Government, of course, were far worse when it came to giving contracts to the private sector. Those of us who were here at the time will know that they did not pay the same tariff—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) keeps chirping away from the Opposition Front Bench; if she listened, she might learn something. [Interruption.] Well she might, and other hon. Members might well too. Many of them were not here at the time, but those who were will recall—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) is exercising his democratic rights as a parliamentarian, so he must be heard—preferably with courtesy, but certainly without noise.

Philip Davies: Thank you, Mr Speaker; I appreciate that.

I was making the point that when the Labour party gave out contracts to the private sector, it actually paid the private providers a higher tariff for carrying out that work than they paid NHS hospitals and providers. To
my mind, that was a complete outrage. If Labour was so much against the private sector, why on earth was it paying private providers a higher tariff than NHS providers? It was the current Government who stopped that absurd practice and made sure that private providers were paid the same tariff as NHS providers. The hon. Member for Wirral West could have mentioned that in her remarks, but she failed to do so.

As I said, the whole Bill is based on a false premise, because it was the last Labour Government who introduced the private sector into the NHS and paid private providers more for carrying out the same work, and the current Government have dealt with that absurdity.

The hon. Lady was pretty quiet about the part of the Bill that deals with section 38 of the Immigration Act 2014, which she wishes to repeal. That section requires nationals from outside the European economic area who come to the UK for longer than six months to pay a health surcharge when making their immigration application. Although no statistics are yet available on the amount of revenue raised from that surcharge, an answer to a parliamentary question last year showed that the Government estimated that they would recover about £200 million a year from foreign nationals using the NHS. The hon. Lady wishes to repeal that legislation. In effect, she wants foreign nationals to come to the UK and use the NHS free of charge. No wonder she mentioned so little of that. At the end of her speech she talked about the financial crisis that the NHS is suffering, yet she is bringing forward a Bill that will stop the NHS being able to recover some of the money spent on treating foreign nationals. The whole Bill is a complete absurdity and nonsense.

If the hon. Lady is proud of that provision in the Bill, why did she not mention it during her speech? Perhaps she is secretly embarrassed about it. Perhaps she knows that her constituents would not particularly appreciate her attempt to introduce legislation to give foreign nationals free treatment, which would cost the NHS more money rather than saving it money. I know that she is one of the last remaining supporters of the Leader of the Opposition, but even he might think that was rather a strange way of trying to improve the NHS’s financial position.

I know that this is the same Bill that the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) presented during the last Session. Perhaps the hon. Member for Wirral West did not actually read the Bill. Perhaps she presented it without having looked at it, and did not realise that it included that particular provision. Either there has been an omission on her part, or we have the rather strange absurdity that she wants to introduce legislation to take at least £200 million a year away from the NHS. She might be able to discuss how that would help the NHS, but I do not see the logic in it.

I do not intend to prevent the hon. Lady from having her moment in the sun. I merely wished to point out that the whole Bill is based on a false premise. It was the last Labour Government who introduced the private sector into the NHS, not the current Government. No matter how many times the hon. Lady repeats that particular myth, it will not get off the ground. Her Bill would cost the NHS more rather than saving it any money, and on that basis, when it comes before the House, I shall be here.

Question put (Standing Order No. 23) and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Margaret Greenwood, Caroline Lucas, Dawn Butler, Stella Creasy, Nic Dakin, Peter Dowd, Mike Kane, Liz McInnes, Yasmin Qureshi, Marie Rimmer, Stephen Twigg and John Pugh present the Bill.

Margaret Greenwood accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on 4 November 2016 and to be printed (Bill 51).

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During a debate on 13 June, I raised the issue of British taxpayers’ money being used to fund convicted Palestinian terrorists. I twice requested that the Minister of State, Department for International Development, publish the memorandum of understanding between DFID and the Palestinian Authority. The Minister has now written an extraordinary letter to me, saying that his officials are seeking a meeting with the Palestinian Authority to discuss the release of the document. The Palestinian Authority is being given the right to veto a Member of Parliament’s request for information. How are we supposed to hold the Government to account when they refuse to release crucial documentation unless they are given permission to do so by the Palestinian Authority?

Mr Speaker: It sounds a rum business, I am bound to say, but it is not a matter for the Chair. It is a matter that will have to be pursued with a terrier-like tenacity, and knowing the hon. Gentleman—as I have done for 30 years, since our robust skirmishes in the students’ union of the University of Essex—I can testify to his possession of that quality in a high degree. I therefore rather imagine that he will pursue the matter until he gets what he wants.
INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Order, 30 June, and Standing Order 118(6)),

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Jenny Willott to the office of ordinary member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority with effect from 7 August 2016 for the period ending 31 December 2020.—(Margot James.)

The House divided: Ayes 312, Noes 45.

**Division No. 45**

**AYES**

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Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism

1.17 pm

The Minister for Security (Mr John Hayes): I beg to move,

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) (No. 2) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 11 July, be approved.

We can never entirely eliminate the threat from terrorism, but we are determined to do what we can to minimise the threat from terrorism in the UK and abroad. Additionally, we must continue to demonstrate our support for other members of the international community in their efforts to tackle terrorism wherever it occurs. Proscription is an important tool in those efforts; it is part of the Government’s strategy to disrupt terrorist activity.

The four groups we propose to add to the list of terrorist organisations, amending schedule 2 to the Terrorism Act 2000, are the Global Islamic Media Front, including the Bangla Team; the Turkistan Islamic party; the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur; and Jamaah Ansharut Daulah. This is the 20th order under the Act. These groups are particularly relevant to south and south-east Asia but, significantly, also to the ongoing conflict in Syria.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I am sure the Minister will find the House in full agreement with what he is proposing today, but may I ask a question of fact? How many organisations are currently proscribed?

Mr Hayes: I will be dealing with that later in my remarks. I know the right hon. Gentleman takes a keen interest in these matters as Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee. Indeed, he contributed the last time I was at the Dispatch Box on these subjects, and I will also be referring to some of the remarks he made on that occasion later in my speech.

I want to emphasise that these groups are also significant to the conflict in Syria. The House will of course be aware that Syria is the No. 1 destination for jihadists in the world. The recent attacks earlier this month in Bangladesh demonstrate the high threat level from terrorism in Asia. Proscribing these appalling organisations sends a strong message that terrorist activity is not tolerated wherever it happens.

Under section 3 of the 2000 Act, the Home Secretary has the power to proscribe an organisation that she believes is currently concerned in terrorism. If the statutory test is met, the Home Secretary may exercise discretion to proscribe the organisation, and it may be useful to the House to set out the factors that are considered when exercising that discretion. These include the nature and scale of the organisation’s activities and the need to support other members of the international community in tackling terrorism.

I also want to say a word about the effect of proscription. Proscription means that an organisation is outlawed and therefore unable to operate in the UK. It is a criminal offence for a person to belong to, support or arrange a meeting in support of a proscribed organisation, or to wear clothing or carry articles in public which arouse reasonable suspicion that an individual is a member or supporter of a proscribed organisation.
Proscription can support other disruptive activity including the use of immigration powers such as exclusion or prosecution for other offences. It also acts to support strong messaging to deter fundraising and recruitment. Additionally, the assets of a proscribed organisation are subject to seizure as terrorist assets. Given the wide-ranging impact of this power to proscribe, the Home Secretary exercises it only after thoroughly reviewing the available evidence on an organisation.

I want to deal with the question put by the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). Currently, 66 international and 14 Northern Ireland-related terrorist organisations are proscribed. When we last debated these matters, we were talking about de-proscription rather than proscription, and he asked about the review and appeal processes. He made the case for these matters to be reviewed periodically because he was concerned that proscription was an indefinite business. I asked those questions too, when I arrived at the Home Office and took on these responsibilities.

Currently, an organisation can apply to be de-proscribed. That process, like the proscription process, is a thorough one. The Home Secretary has to respond to a request within 90 days and the organisation can then appeal to a commission made up of senior judicial figures. I have become convinced that that is the right way to go about these things. As long as that appeal process—first to the Home Secretary and then beyond—is a robust one, the emphasis should be on those organisations to make their case. I think it is right to take this opportunity to deal with that question, as the right hon. Gentleman has raised it on a previous occasion.

Keith Vaz: The independent reviewer, David Anderson, has suggested that there needs to be a time limit. What is the Government’s response to that? On a number of previous occasions, including before the Minister took office, the Government said that their response would be coming shortly. It is now a couple of years since the Minister first mentioned this. Does he have a view on whether the Government accept what the independent reviewer has said?

Mr Hayes: I have made clear my own views on this, but the right hon. Gentleman is right to ask what the formal response will be. I take his omissions on these matters very seriously and I will return to the Home Office with fresh alacrity to deal with the specific issue of how we will respond formally. He has made the case for these matters to be reviewed periodically because he was concerned that proscription was an indefinite business. I asked those questions too, when I arrived at the Home Office and took on these responsibilities.

As I have said, the proscription process is a thorough one. It includes looking at open source material, intelligence material and advice that reflects consultation across Government, including with the intelligence and law enforcement agencies. The cross-Government proscription review group supports the Home Secretary in her decision-making process. The Home Secretary’s decision to proscribe is taken carefully after considering all the evidence.

Although I am unable to comment on specific intelligence, I can provide the House with a summary of each group’s activities in turn. The first group that this order proscribes is the Global Islamic Media Front, including the Bangla Team. It is an Islamic extremist propaganda organisation associated with al-Qaeda and other extremist groups around the world. Its activities include propagating a jihadist ideology, producing and disseminating training manuals to guide terror attacks and publishing jihadi newscasts. It produces materials in a number of languages including Arabic, Urdu, Bengali, English, German and French.

Hon. Members will be aware of the rise of sectarian violence in Bangladesh and of its tragic effects. The first group we are proposing to proscribe in this order has claimed responsibility for a number of prominent murders and attacks involving secular bloggers since 2013. For example, the Bangla Team has published an infographic chronicling attacks carried out against “blasphemers in Bangladesh”. The graphic contained the names and locations of 13 attacks, eight of which were celebrated as successful assassinations.

The second group this order proscribes is the Turkistan Islamic Party. This is an Islamic terrorist and separatist organisation founded in 1989. It has claimed responsibility for a number of attacks in China, the latest in April 2014. The group also has terrorist links to al-Qaeda. In November 2015, the TIP released the 18th issue of its magazine Islamic Turkistan, which detailed the group’s jihad against the authorities and the fact that it hosted training camps controlled by the Pakistani Taliban. More recently, the TIP has maintained an active and visible presence in the Syrian war. It has published a number of video clips of its activities and claimed responsibility for attacks and suicide bombings. The TIP has been banned by the United Nations and is sanctioned by the USA under the terrorist exclusion list.

The third group to be proscribed is Mujahidin Indonesia Timur, which is Indonesia’s most active terrorist group. It is based in the mountainous jungle area of Poso in central Sulawesi and is led by Indonesia’s most wanted terrorist. The group’s modus operandi is to attack the police and the army, and those attacks include the use of explosives and shootings. The group has been responsible for the deaths of at least a dozen police officers. The fact that it has claimed responsibility for a number of recent terrorist attacks confirms its determination not only to propagate but to plan and execute terrorism.

The last group to be proscribed is Jamaah Ansharut Daulah, which was established in March 2015 following the merger of several Indonesian extremist and terrorist groups. It has close ties to other terrorist groups, including Daesh. Its membership includes several former Jemaah Islamiyah terrorists. JI was responsible for the 2002 and 2005 Bali attacks. JAD was responsible for the attack in Jakarta in January 2016 which was claimed by Daesh and resulted in the deaths of seven people.

Proscription matters, and our determination to counter the malevolence that I have described matters too. In thwarting terror, we must act—as a people, a House and a Government—with an iron will and strong determination. The American poet Robert Frost wrote:

“Don’t ever take a fence down until you know why it was put up.”

In these dangerous times, we must—and will—do all we can to protect ourselves and others from attack. I believe it is right that these four groups should be proscribed in the way that I have set out.
Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): I would customarily start a speech such as this by saying something like, “Where is the Home Secretary?” but even I will admit that the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) has better things to do today. I want to take this opportunity on behalf of the Opposition Benches to pay tribute to her tenure as Home Secretary. I have found that she has certainly been prepared to listen, particularly in the case of Hillsborough, on which her work was outstanding for the families who had faced a terrible injustice for all those years. I hope that she will continue to listen, and I have every hope that she will go on to make a good Prime Minister.

I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), the Minister of State—for now. With the fast impending reshuffle, he will be twitchy on the Front Bench, but I suspect that his obvious talents will be rightly rewarded.

The order before the House today arises from the Terrorism Act 2000, which was passed by the previous Labour Government and was intended to provide a flexible framework to deal with the changing and emerging threat of new forms of terrorism. It is fair to say that we have seen unimaginable events in the 16 years since that legislation was originally enacted. Specifically, we have seen the rise of terrorism based on a distortion of Islam and its values. It is important to describe it as such rather than use the shorthand “Islamic terrorism”, because that is inaccurate and makes life harder for those in the Muslim community who face a daily and monumental battle against this perversion of their faith. Let us be careful in our language and help those battling radicalisation, not those who foment it.

The BBC has taken to using the phrase “so-called Islamic State”. In my view, that is not helpful. The use of “so-called” does not undermine “Islamic” or “State” and those are the two words that the public hear. It gives undeserved status to the organisation and makes it sound as though it is an authorised branch of Islam. I urge the director-general of the BBC to review that editorial decision and to move, as the Government have, to the use of Daesh. That is important, as I said at the beginning, because we face a highly changeable and challenging terrorism landscape.

Figures from the “Global Peace Index 2016” report show that deaths from terrorism increased by 80% in the past year. Only 69 countries did not record a terrorist incident. The intensity of terrorist activity is also increasing. Last year, 11 countries reported 500 or more deaths from terrorist incidents—double the year before—and incidents are happening all the time. Last month, a police officer was killed in France, for which Daesh claimed responsibility, and 44 people were killed and 239 injured by a bomb at Istanbul airport, for which it is suspected that Daesh was again responsible. Those are big increases on a rising trend. The year 2014 saw some 13,500 terrorist attacks around the world and 32,700 deaths. This is the context in which we are considering today’s order. As the terrorism landscape changes, the Government are right to be vigilant and to try to keep one step ahead.

We are being asked today to give agreement to the Government to proscribe four organisations linked to terrorism. Two have links to al-Qaeda and the others have links with Daesh. The public and political debate is obviously focused on the activities of Daesh in Syria and the wider middle east. It would however be a mistake for this House to lose sight of what is happening in Asia, particularly south-east Asia, as the Minister rightly said. It would be a further mistake for the House to focus on Daesh and to lose focus on al-Qaeda and its efforts to regroup. That is why the Government are right to bring this order for consideration today and to disrupt the activities of the relevant organisations before they establish a stronger foothold. The evidence that the Home Office put before the House makes it clear that there are grounds to proscribe the organisations.

We accept that evidence and will support the order this afternoon, but I want to make one point before I close that I ask the Minister and the Government to take into account. I want to go back to when the legislation was first introduced and to the first group of organisations to be proscribed under the 2000 Act, which included the International Sikh Youth Federation. There were objections at the time and what followed was a protracted legal argument in the courts, which ended only recently, and led to the Government coming to the House to lift the proscription. Learning from that experience, I say to the Minister that evidence does change over time. There may have been grounds to proscribe that organisation back then, but those grounds clearly expired some time ago. However, the people to which such orders relate may find that they stigmatise a section of their community.

Keith Vaz: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The fear of stigma is very much in the minds of communities. An example is the LTTE, which was correctly proscribed by the Government. Its leader was killed and the organisation no longer exists, but a stigma is still attached to members of the Tamil community. That is why it is so important to have a time limit, after which proscriptions can be reviewed, rather than people having to go to court each time. We of course support what the Government are doing on this occasion—we always have—but it is important that we are able to review without the need to go to court.

Andrew Burnham: I strongly agree with the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee. The experience of the Sikh community in challenging the proscription of the International Sikh Youth Federation was pretty dispiriting, in that it had to pursue a lengthy legal process while facing an unresponsive Home Office. There may be good grounds to proscribe organisations—my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) accepted that there was a case with the organisation that he mentioned—but the stigma does affect a much wider community.

When the evidence changes, so should the Government, who should act quickly to remove any perceptions. I hope that they listen to what my right hon. Friend said—and they would be right to, because he is full of judgment and wisdom on such matters. My only request of the Government is that they institute a regime of the kind that he suggests, that there is a regular process of review, and that there are up-to-date assessments of the organisations that pose a genuine threat to the safety of our country. We should also make the challenge process easier than it was found to be by members of the Sikh community.
That is the only caveat that I place on our support for the order. Terrorism is a threat to our country. It is right that we take every possible action to root it out and we should work with the communities that struggle to deal with it. The Government are right to bring the order before the House today and we will give it our full support.

1.39 pm

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): You will no doubt be pleased, Mr Speaker, as will hon. Members, to hear that I intend to keep my comments brief, with a view to freeing up as much time as possible for discussion of the Iraq war inquiry.

Although issues of national security are reserved, the Scottish Government have co-operated closely with the UK Government and will continue to do so. We recognise that the security services and the police require adequate powers to fight terrorism. However, such powers should always be necessary, proportionate and in accordance with the rule of law. We have assessed the four organisations that it is proposed to add to the proscribed list against that benchmark. There is clear evidence that the Global Islamic Media Front propagates jihadist ideology. The MIT has a clear modus operandi of attacking the police and army, and it has made many killings, as the Minister outlined. The Turan Islamic party has claimed responsibility for a number of atrocities in China. The JAD was responsible for the awful mall attack we all witnessed earlier this year in Jakarta.

I wish to add the calls from Scottish National party Members to the request made by the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) to the BBC to reconsider the language it uses when dealing with terrorist organisations, and in particular, the kind of legitimacy it gives by using the phrase “so-called Islamic State”, which I consider to be appalling. These people are not Islamic and the phrase should not be used any more. The BBC should accede to calls championed by my SNP colleagues that we should use, as the Government now do, the term “Daesh”.

1.41 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, wish to add my party’s support to what the Minister is doing today. As we all know, the focus is very much on Syria, although today’s proscriptions go further than that, in dealing with organisations from the far east, and he has referred to the names of proscribed organisations.

The Prime Minister, in today’s Prime Minister’s questions, said that Daesh has had 20,000 of its terrorists killed in battle and has lost some 40% of its territory. As that has happened, and as Daesh is becoming more fragmented and is not the overall body that it was in the past, there will be more organisations to proscribe, as small splinter groups and organisations spring up from across the whole of the middle east. The shadow Minister also touched on this, but let me ask the Minister: is there a better way of doing this? That is my first question.

Secondly, we have been told that the legislation and the change will apply to Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Minister referred to proscribed organisations in Northern Ireland in his speech and in his response to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). The threat level from Northern Ireland-related terrorism in Northern Ireland has been at severe since this was first published in 2010. What is being done to bring down the threat level? What impact is the high threat level having in terms of the 2000 Act and Northern Ireland’s ability to suppress and prevent terrorism? Is the Act effective enough in dealing with those organisations already proscribed in Northern Ireland, given the high level of threat?

Thirdly, as we all know, terrorists across the world seem to flock together to supply each other with weapons, ammunition and bomb-making explosives. Some groups in Northern Ireland, dissident republicans in particular, have been very focused on that. I do not know whether this is the Minister’s remit, but can he say whether any activity has been seen involving terrorist groups in the far east, the middle east or south America, and those at home in Northern Ireland? I will leave that with him.

1.44 pm

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): I wish briefly to ask in this debate why the Government still have not banned, and have not included in today’s order, Hizb ut-Tahrir. Around the time of the 7/7 attacks, the current Prime Minister—if he is still in office as we speak—said:

“We think it should be banned—why has it not happened?”—[Official Report, 4 July 2007; Vol. 462, c. 951.]

In 2009, he attacked his predecessor in very strong terms for not banning that organisation. In 2010, the Conservative party manifesto said:

“A Conservative government will ban any organisations which advocate hate or the violent overthrow of our society, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir.”

My point to the Minister is simple: why have the Government, after all these years—after six years in government and all the work they have been able to do on all these issues—still not banned Hizb ut-Tahrir, as they promised to do on so many occasions?

Mr Speaker: Order. If the Minister of State wishes briefly to respond, he is at liberty to do so, but he is under no obligation to do so.

Mr John Hayes: I was going to respond.

Mr Speaker: The House will bear that with stoicism and fortitude, and may even experience excitement in the process. We shall see.

1.45 pm

Mr Hayes: I hope my remarks will be pithy, but it would be a discourtesy to those who have contributed to the debate if I were not to deal with some of the important matters they have raised. First, let me deal with the points made by the shadow Secretary of State and thank him for his support for the work we are trying to do today. I echo his sentiments about both the dynamism and the intensity of terrorism—he is right about both—and because of that dynamism we need to keep these matters under constant review. I thank him for his remarks about my talents and hope that they have been heard right across the Treasury Bench and further afield. He is also right to draw attention to Asia,
and south-east Asia in particular. It is of course important that we focus on Syria—as I say, it is the main destination for jihadists from across the world—but we should not underestimate the worldwide spread of terrorism and indeed we do not in the Home Office. I can assure him that we take Asia and south-east Asia very seriously, which is partly why we are dealing with these matters in the way we are today.

A considerable number of comments were made by the Chairman of the Select Committee and others about the process by which we proscribe and have proscribed organisations. I will go a little further than perhaps my officials and others might have expected, and say now that I am not going to put in place a statutory period of review, contrary to the advice of David Anderson and the advocacy of the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee. However, I have listened carefully to what the shadow Minister and others have said about the speed at which the current system works. If we are not going to have a review, and I think we should not—that is my formal response on behalf of the Government, which I will put in writing—we need to ensure that the process, as it stands, is fit for purpose. That means ensuring that it is not burdensome, that it is not too lengthy and that it is not insensitive in the way it was suggested it might have been in some cases. To that end, I will look again at making sure we put in place a process that is robust and transparent, but which is not endless. That is the point the shadow Minister was making, and he is right about the effect that stigma can have. I understand that and I want to be as sensitive to it as we can be. He can reasonably say that he and the Select Committee Chairman have earned that commitment from me, given that they put their case so reasonably.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised some issues specific to Northern Ireland and some that are more general. He can be certain that the Government look at these matters very carefully and repeatedly. As I said earlier, we consider proscription with absolute care. He is right, too, that we need to look at the links between organisations, which I talked about when I introduced this order. I will follow up the question he raised about those links. I cannot speak about some of those matters on the Floor of the House, because they are highly sensitive. As he will appreciate, these intelligence issues cannot be aired on all occasions. I will, however, follow up his question. He will understand that part of it relates to something he has raised in this House before, as he is a diligent Member of this House and understands how these matters are made aware of them and the names under which they operate in order to disguise their activities. The group is not proscribed in the UK at the moment, but, as I have said, these matters are regularly scrutinised and considered by Government. I think that I had better leave it at that. With those comments—

Andy Burnham: Before the Minister sits down, will he address the point that I raised, and that was echoed by the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless)? I am talking about the use by the BBC of the phrase, “so-called Islamic State”. I have been in mosques recently and seen how it causes great despondency among the people who are trying to counter radicalisation. They say that the use of the words “so-called” does not undermine the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”. They feel very strongly that, by repeating that phrase, the BBC is undermining the words “Islamic” or “State”.

Richard Arkless: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I am drawing my remarks to their exciting conclusion and I do not want to spoil that, but I will give way very briefly.

Richard Arkless: Very quickly, can the Minister confirm that he will write to the BBC to request this, and that we will not just have a talking shop in the House today?

Mr Hayes: That alone would not be good enough. I will speak to the BBC and write to it. The matter will also be recorded today in Hansard. The letter will leave my office this afternoon, and I will speak to BBC staff by telephone today. As you have often said, Mr Speaker, I never disappoint in this House.

The exciting peroration to which I was about to move is this. Edmund Burke said:

“All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”
The good men of this country, and women—I emphasise that particularly in the current climate—when it comes to the struggle against—

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear not only the Minister of State’s peroration, but application.

Mr Hayes: When it comes to the matter of terrorism, this House will speak with a single voice, exercise an iron will and certainly, rather than doing nothing, do everything it can to bring about its defeat.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful—and I think the House will be—to the right hon. Gentleman, in light of the pressure on time, for his addressing us with the eloquence of Demosthenes and with a pithiness that is all his own.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) (No. 2) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 11 July, be approved.

Report of the Iraq Inquiry

[1ST ALLOTTED DAY]


1.55 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Report of the Iraq Inquiry.

I welcome the opportunity to open this first day of debate on the report of the Iraq inquiry. I suspect that, in the circumstances, the world’s eye will not be focused with quite the laser-like intensity that might have been expected when the debate was originally announced.

Let me start by paying tribute to the work of Sir John Chilcot and other members of the inquiry committee, including the late Sir Martin Gilbert, who sadly passed away during the writing of the report. For anyone who has read even just part of this report—I defy anyone to say that they have read the entire thing—it will be clear that the committee has discharged what is a Herculean task thoroughly, fairly, with great rigour and a degree of frankness that will reassure those who feared a whitewash and that ensures there can be no ambiguity about the lessons that need to be learned.

I also want to signal my understanding that the publication of the Chilcot report a week ago will have been a poignant and no doubt difficult moment for the families of those who lost loved ones in Iraq. It is important, even as we examine the detail of the report and conduct this debate, that they know that this House will never forget the sacrifice of the 179 British servicemen and women, as well as the 23 British civilians, who lost their lives during the conflict and its aftermath. We will also never forget the service and the sacrifice of the thousands more who suffered life-changing injuries, and we reaffirm to them today our determination that they will get the care they need for the rest of their lives. I hope that the survivors and the relatives of the fallen alike will have taken comfort from the assiduous and detailed examination of the war to be found in this report. The sacrifice of our service people demands nothing less.

More than 13 years since the invasion of Iraq began, 10 years since the Conservative party and others first called for it, and seven years since the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown finally commissioned it, the Iraq inquiry report sets out to try to answer the crucial
questions that have dominated the debate about the war in Iraq and the events that preceded and followed it. Did the United Kingdom decide to go to war on a mistaken or false premise? Were all the decisions leading up to the war and subsequently properly taken and informed by proper consideration of legal advice? Was the operation to invade Iraq properly planned and executed? Did the Government of the day foresee and prepare adequately for the aftermath? Were our armed forces adequately funded and provided with the proper protection and equipment for their task?

Digesting fully the contents of this report will take weeks rather than days. In 13 volumes and 2.6 million words, Sir John and his committee take us in painstaking detail through the decision making in Government between 2001, when the possibility of military action first arose, and 2009, when British combat troops finally departed Iraq. They set out the conclusions that they have reached on some of the central issues that have proved so controversial, including the handling, use and presentation of secret intelligence, and identify many lessons that should be learned and implemented for the future.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary accept that a number of us are a bit perplexed at the speed with which this admittedly two-day debate is taking place? As he said, there are 2.6 million words to be read, and for a full understanding it seems to me that today’s debate is a little premature and might have been better left until the autumn.

Mr Hammond: I suspect that right hon. and hon. Members would have been dismayed if they had not had an opportunity to put on record their reactions to the Chilcot report, albeit necessarily initial reactions. We will no doubt hear in the course of debate whether the concerns that my right hon. Friend expresses are justified. We will no doubt hear in the course of debate whether the concerns that my right hon. Friend expresses are justified. We will no doubt hear in the course of debate whether the concerns that my right hon. Friend expresses are justified.

The words of the very first paragraph of the executive summary of the report spell out the enormity of the undertaking and thus the gravity that should have attended all aspects of its preparation and execution:

“In 2003, for the first time since the Second World War, the United Kingdom took part in an opposed invasion and full-scale warfare capabilities, was determined to preserve and if possible enhance its capabilities ... and was pursuing an active and successful policy of deception and concealment.”

There were good reasons for this belief, given the past actions of Saddam’s regime. His past use of chemical weapons against Kurdish civilians and Iranian military forces, his refusal to comply with the demands of weapons inspectors, and his refusal to comply with UN Security Council resolutions all pointed in that direction. As Sir John set out:

“As late as 17 March, Mr Blair was being advised by the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee that Iraq possessed chemical and biological weapons, the means to deliver them and the capacity to produce them.”

However, as Sir John also says:

“It is now clear that policy on Iraq was made on the basis of flawed intelligence and assessments.”

He finds that

“At no stage was the proposition that Iraq might no longer have chemical, biological or nuclear weapons or programmes identified and examined”

by either the Joint Intelligence Committee or the wider intelligence community.

In the case that he set out to the House of Commons on 18 March 2003, Mr Blair also argued that there was a link between international terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, and that—"I quote from the then Prime Minister’s statement—

“the two together constitute a fundamental assault on our way of life.”—[Official Report, 18 March 2003; Vol. 401, c. 767.]

Sir John finds that

“While it was reasonable for the Government to be concerned about the fusion of proliferation and terrorism, there was no basis in the JIC Assessments to suggest that Iraq itself represented such a threat.”

When it comes to the use and presentation of intelligence, in particular the Government’s dossier on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction published on the day of the Commons debate on 24 September 2002, Sir John finds that

“There is no evidence that intelligence was improperly included in the dossier or that No. 10 improperly influenced the text” and that

“The JIC accepted ownership of the dossier and agreed its content.”

However, he also finds that the judgments presented in Mr Blair’s statement to the House that day and in the dossier

“were presented with a certainty that was not justified.”

The Joint Intelligence Committee, he finds, should have made it clear to Mr Blair that the assessed intelligence had not established beyond doubt either that Iraq had continued to produce chemical or biological weapons, or that efforts to develop nuclear weapons continued.

On the much debated question of the legality of the war, the inquiry has not expressed a view on whether military action was legal. As Sir John says, that could

“only be resolved by a properly constituted and internationally recognised Court.”

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Government are refusing to release confidential advice that Whitehall officials gave to Gordon Brown about the remit of the inquiry. This advice was what made it impossible for Sir John Chilcot to rule on whether the 2003 war was illegal. The Government’s refusal lies in the face of an Information Tribunal ruling which ordered the material’s release, and it means that the public cannot see what options were considered when deciding
on the nature and the scope of the inquiry when it was established. Will the Government reconsider their refusal to release that information?

Mr Hammond: The Government, in considering this report, will look at all these matters, but that is not the answer that Sir John has primarily identified for his decision not to pass any view on whether military action was legal. He says that the inquiry was not constituted in a way, nor did it have the necessary skills or qualifications, to make that decision.

Joanna Cherry: With respect, that is precisely my question. The Information Tribunal has ordered the release of material showing why the remit of the inquiry was so refined. This is not a criticism of Chilcot; it is a criticism of the present Government for refusing to release information about why the scope of the inquiry was restricted and could not look at the legality. That is what the public want to know.

Mr Hammond: The point I am making is that Sir John himself identifies not the lack of remit, but the lack of qualifications of the members of the inquiry to reach that decision. He says that that could “only be resolved by a properly constituted and internationally recognised court.”

The hon. and learned Lady will know that a huge number of documents have been declassified and made available in this process, but clearly it is not possible to declassify every document.

Sir John goes on to find that, although the then Attorney General, Lord Goldsmith, advised on 13 March 2003 that there was, on balance, a secure legal basis for military action,

“The circumstances in which it was ultimately decided that there was a legal basis for UK participation were far from satisfactory.”

Sir John, however, is clear that military action was not undertaken as “a last resort”—that there were further diplomatic steps that could have been taken to seek compliance by the Saddam regime—and that by moving to a military solution when the UNSC would not sanction such a development the UK, far from upholding, was “undermining the Security Council”.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): The Foreign Secretary will have seen the comments of Robin Butler before publication of the Chilcot report last week. According to Robin Butler,

“The legality or illegality of the Iraq war was never a question Sir John Chilcot was asked to deal with”,

so why will not the Government release the documents which might give the public and Parliament an insight into why the Chilcot inquiry did not have the remit and was not qualified to deal with the legality question?

Mr Hammond: The point that I have made already and will make again is that as I understand it Sir John has not identified lack of remit as the reason why he has given no opinion on the legality of the war. He has identified a lack of appropriate skill sets in the inquiry, and he suggested that it should be a matter that is dealt with by a properly constituted and internationally recognised court. As I have said already, the Government in looking at the report of the Iraq inquiry—it will take some time to do that—will consider all these matters, including questions that the right hon. Gentleman is raising about whether any further documents can appropriately be declassified and made available.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Obviously, John Chilcot’s report is masterful in its description of the formal records and the detail, and in the lessons he very wisely draws. However, will the Foreign Secretary, as a politician, look at the political context for a moment? Does he agree that the background was clearly that the Americans and the Blair Government wished to invade Iraq to change the regime and get rid of Saddam Hussein? However, that would have been illegal regime change, so what my right hon. Friend has just gone through—people’s desperate desire to find evidence and to persuade themselves that there were weapons of mass destruction, that Saddam was not co-operating with the inspectors, that there was a risk of terrorism and so on—was mainly, and no doubt subconsciously, motivated by a desire to give the Attorney General some basis on which he could say that this action was legal?

Mr Hammond: My reading of the inquiry report is that it does indeed identify that regime change as an objective would be illegal in UK law, but I think the suggestion is that, through a process of group-think, the people who were involved in this process came to see regime change as a means to deliver the legitimate objective, which was compliance with the UN Security Council resolutions. A fair reading of the report suggests that that is the process of mind that is being spelled out by Sir John.

Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab): I hope I may be able to assist the Foreign Secretary, although whether he will regard it like that is another matter. I perfectly understand what the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) says, and I understand that it is a view that he has held for a long time, but having had the advantage—that he did not—of being in the Cabinet room when these discussions were taking place, can I just tell the Foreign Secretary that, as we got closer and closer to decision time, the then Prime Minister, Mr Blair, stressed on repeated occasions to the Cabinet that the resolution called for Saddam Hussein to comply with the UN inspectors, and if he did so comply, there would be no military action? He pointed out that the downside of that was that this terrible man, who certainly did commit war crimes on a mass scale, would remain in power, but that that was a downside we would have to accept.

Mr Hammond: I am sure the House is grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving that insight from the frontline, as it were, of where this debate started, but one of the things that comes out very clearly from a reading of the report is the misalignment between the position of the UK Government and the position of the US Government, who clearly were pursuing regime change as an objective, as they were legally entitled to do under their own regime.

On operational planning, it is well recorded that the initial invasion and defeat of Iraqi forces proceeded rapidly. The UK’s armed forces performed extremely well—a fact of which we and they should be proud—despite
the changes to the overall invasion plan as a result of the Turkish Government’s decision to refuse access to Iraq’s borders through Turkish territory. In fact, Iraq’s military turned out to be a good deal less formidable than many of us had imagined.

The task that should have been at least as big as preparing for the invasion was preparing for the aftermath. As Tony Blair said before the Liaison Committee in January 2003:

“You do not engage in military conflict that may produce regime change unless you are prepared to follow through and work in the aftermath of that regime change to ensure the country is stable and the people are properly looked after.”

However, Sir John has found that, when the invasion of Iraq began, the UK Government

“was not in a position to conclude that satisfactory plans had been drawn up and preparations made to meet known post-conflict challenges and risks in Iraq”.

Understanding what those challenges were—the need to restore broken infrastructure, administer a state and provide security, including against the threats of internecine violence, terrorism and Iranian influence—did not, as the report clearly states, “require the benefit of hindsight”.

However, the Government assumed that the US would be responsible for preparing the post-conflict plan, that the plan would be authorised by the UN Security Council and that the UN would play a major post-conflict role, with the international community sharing the post-conflict burden.

The report finds that the Government “expected not to have to make a substantial commitment to post-conflict administration.”

It concludes that the failure to anticipate and plan for post-conflict challenges in the short-to-medium term increased the risk that the UK would be unable to respond to the unexpected in Iraq, and, in the longer term, reduced the likelihood of achieving the UK’s strategic objectives there.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Let me just bring the Secretary of State back for a second to the point about regime change. Does he agree that it is important that what is said in private should be reflected in Parliament, and vice versa? On 18 March 2003, Tony Blair said to Parliament:

“I have never put the justification for action as regime change.”—[Official Report, 18 March 2003, Vol. 401, c. 772.]

However, in a private note to Bush just a week later, on 26 March, he said:

“That’s why, though Iraq’s WMD is the immediate justification for action, ridding Iraq of Saddam is the real prize.”

Mr Hammond: It goes without saying that Ministers—indeed, all Members—should be completely truthful in their utterances to Parliament at all times, and the ministerial code makes that clear.

Specifically on the reconstruction effort, Sir John finds that “the UK failed to plan or prepare for the major reconstruction programme required” and that lessons that had been learned through previous reviews of post-conflict reconstruction and stabilisation “were not applied in Iraq”.

On the issue of de-ba’athification, Sir John finds that early decisions on the form of de-Ba’athification and its implementation

“had a significant and lasting negative impact on Iraq.”

Limiting de-Ba’athification to the top three tiers, rather than four, of the party would have had the potential to be far less damaging to Iraq’s post-invasion recovery and political stability. The UK chose not to act on its well-founded misgivings about handing over implementation of de-Ba’athification policy to the governing council.

Turning to the equipping and resourcing of British troops, Sir John finds that the Government failed to match resources to the objectives. He records that by undertaking concurrent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Government “knowingly exceeded the Defence Planning Assumptions.”

At least in part as a consequence, Sir John concludes that the military role ended “a long way from success.”

Furthermore, he finds that “delays in providing adequate medium weight Protected Patrol Vehicles and the failure to meet the needs of UK forces...for ISTAR and helicopters should not have been tolerated” and that the “MoD was slow in responding to the developing threat from Improvised Explosive Devices.”

At the end of this analysis, Sir John finds plainly that “the Iraq of 2009 certainly did not meet the UK’s objectives...it fell far short of strategic success.”

These findings relate to decisions taken at that time, and the arrangements and processes in place at the time. It is, therefore, for those who were Ministers at the time to answer for their actions. This Government’s role is not to seek to apportion blame or to revisit those actions; it is to ensure that the lessons identified by Chilcot are learned, and that they have already led to changes or will lead to changes being implemented in the future.

The Government, including previous Administrations, have not stood still while waiting for the findings we have before us today. There were a number of important reviews relating to the invasion and occupation of Iraq before Chilcot, including Lord Butler’s review of intelligence on weapons of mass destruction, Lord Hutton’s inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr David Kelly, and the inquiries of the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee and the Intelligence and Security Committee of both Houses. As a result of each, lessons have been identified and changes have been implemented, so a good deal of the work has already been done.

Alex Salmond: I hear what the Foreign Secretary says about processes, but does he judge that the post-war reconstruction in Libya would give us any confidence that the lessons have been learned from the post-war reconstruction of Iraq?

Mr Hammond: I think the two things are completely different. In Iraq at the end of the war, Britain was a joint occupying power and shared joint responsibility for the occupation commission. We were in control of the territory, exercising all the functions and responsibility of Government. As a result of the decisions that were taken around Libya, British boots were never on the ground, we were never in control of that country and
we were never an occupying power, so we did not have it within our capability to take the actions that we should have done.

Let me summarise the most important lessons that Sir John has drawn in this report. First, taking military action should always be a last resort. Only after exhausting all credible alternatives should we consider taking the country to war. I believe—this is my personal belief—that the political price that has been paid for apparently neglecting this important principle will ensure that future Administrations are unlikely to overlook it.

Secondly, how government is conducted matters. The failures of process, of challenge, and even of proper record-keeping identified by Sir John were serious and widespread. In part to prevent such failures in the future, the Conservative-led coalition Government established the National Security Council in May 2010 to ensure that there is proper, co-ordinated, strategic decision making across the whole of Government. The NSC includes the Chief of the Defence Staff, the heads of the intelligence agencies, and the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, as well as relevant Ministers—and now the Attorney General—alongside senior officials. It is properly supported by a dedicated secretariat led by the national security adviser, ensuring that all parts of the national security apparatus are properly joined up across Whitehall and beyond.

So we now have a system that ensures that decisions on serious security issues are taken on the basis of full papers and proper challenge and discussion, with legal advice fully explained and considered, and proposals stress-tested by Departments, with decisions formally recorded. Having sat on the National Security Council for six years, first as an occasional member, as Transport Secretary, and then permanently as Defence Secretary and now Foreign Secretary, it seems to me highly improbable that the process of conduct of business in relation to this matter through 2002 and 2003, as set out by Chilcot, could be repeated now.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I think that the Foreign Secretary’s last comment was particularly complacent. Looking at, for example, the Attorney General, why is that not an independent appointment? Why do we still allow the Attorney General to be an appointment of the Prime Minister? It should be somebody who is independent and legally qualified in this area, and that certainly was not the case during the Iraq war.

Mr Hammond: The Attorney General’s office is of course filled with expert lawyers. The Attorney General produces his advice on the basis of the advice provided to him by his expert lawyers. I have no doubt, from my extensive experience of Attorney General advice, both as Defence Secretary and as Foreign Secretary, that it is impartial, fearless, and quite often gives us advice that we perhaps do not like, and we have to change course accordingly, as is appropriate. [Interruption.] No, the hon. Lady is taking a conspiracy theory too far. If we get advice from the Attorney General that steers us away from a course of action, then we move to a different course of action. I can tell her, from my own direct experience—my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary will have similar examples from the relatively recent past—of advice from the Attorney General causing us to think again and go in a different direction.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is important to note, is it not, that when soil government takes place, officials from the Government Legal Service and the Attorney General’s Office are not present to hear the conversations and to give advice where necessary?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is one of the purposes of a more formal process of decision making. I can say from personal experience that Attorney General advice is often complex, and it is necessary to have it in advance of the meeting at which decisions will be discussed and taken so that one can absorb it and consult one’s own departmental lawyers, as a departmental Minister, to explain it, challenge it, or review it further.

The third lesson to draw from the inquiry is that a culture at the heart of Government that welcomes challenge to the conventional wisdom of “the system”, or the strongly held convictions of Ministers, is essential to avoid the sort of group-think that led to what Chilcot describes as “the ingrained belief...that Saddam Hussein’s regime retained chemical and biological warfare capabilities”.

Inevitably, the culture at the centre of any Government is a product primarily of the climate established by the Prime Minister of the day. Ensuring that people around the NSC table feel free to speak their minds without jeopardising their careers is the greatest contribution a Prime Minister can make. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr Cameron) for the way in which he has done that over the past six years.

Fourthly, proper planning for the aftermath of any intervention in another country is vital to successfully delivering the overall objective. The failure in London properly to plan for the conflict’s aftermath, fatally combined with the flawed assumption that the Americans must have a plan, when they did not, led inevitably to the chaos that we saw on the ground in Iraq. As we know will be the case in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and again, today, Iraq, when the current conflicts in each end, the challenge of rebuilding effective governance in conflict-torn countries is enormous. Under this Government, we have created the conflict, stability and stabilisation fund—CSSF—with £1 billion a year in it now, rising to £1.3 billion by the end of the spending review period. It builds on the success of the cross-Government stabilisation unit to ensure proper planning and preparedness for post-conflict situations and a capacity for rapid deployment of expert staff anywhere in the world.

The fifth lesson that we draw—one that I feel particularly keenly as a former Defence Secretary—is that our armed forces must always be properly equipped for the tasks we ask them to do. That is why we have instituted quinquennial strategic defence and security reviews to ensure that we commit the level of resources necessary to meet the ambition set out in the national security strategy. Since 2010, we have eliminated the £38 billion black hole we inherited in the defence procurement budget; we have continued to meet the NATO commitment to spend at least 2% of our GDP on defence; and we have set out a 10-year forward defence equipment programme, planning to invest at least £178 billion on new military equipment over the next decade. I am proud of these decisions. But we should be clear today that the decision to send our troops into a pre-planned
engagement without the right equipment, in Iraq and later in Afghanistan, was unacceptable and something that no Government should ever allow to happen again.

There are, of course, many more lessons to be drawn from the report of the Iraq inquiry—too many to fit into a single speech—and some of them, I am sure, will be drawn out during the course of the debate today and tomorrow. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney said in his statement last week, there are also some lessons and conclusions that we could draw, but should avoid drawing. First, we should not dismiss the importance of solidarity with our close friends and allies, the United States, when our common security interests are threatened. As both President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry have reaffirmed in their respective recent visits to London, the relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom is special. We share not only culture and history, but fundamental values. America is our principal ally and partner around the world, and our partnership remains vital for our continued security and prosperity. Of course, that does not mean that we should blindly or slavishly follow US foreign policy, or fail to speak frankly and honestly, as close friends should. But we must be clear about the value of the relationship between our two countries, and clear that that value is a legitimate factor to be taken into account in British foreign policy decisions. Protecting and enhancing the special relationship, in itself, makes Britain safer.

Secondly, it would be wrong to conclude that we cannot trust the analysis and judgments of the UK intelligence community. As Foreign Secretary, I know as well as anyone the vital contribution our intelligence agencies make to keeping Britain and the British people safe, and I know the risks they sometimes have to take in order to do so. But intelligence is rarely black and white, and it always comes with a calibrated health warning as to the confidence level the user should attach to it. That places a burden of responsibility on the user when decisions or, indeed, strategic communications are based on intelligence. The reforms that were put in place following the Butler report have, quite properly, separated the process of assessing intelligence from the policy making that flows from it. I believe that our intelligence and policy making machinery today is in much better shape than it was in 2003 as a result of this and other reforms.

Thirdly, we should not conclude that our military lacks capability to intervene successfully around the world. As the Chilcot report highlights, the military invasion of Iraq, despite the problems of planning, was successfully and swiftly completed. It was the failure of policy makers to plan for the aftermath that led to the subsequent deterioration in the security situation.

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, we must not conclude that military intervention in another country is always wrong. As the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999, the British intervention in Sierra Leone in 2000 and the French-led intervention in Mali in 2014 have shown, there are circumstances in which it is absolutely right and appropriate to intervene. Having commemorated just two days ago the 21st anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre, we must also acknowledge that there have been times in our recent history when the international community should have intervened but did not, with Srebrenica and Rwanda being the most prominent examples.

Despite the risks of action and the failures of the past, Britain must not and will not shrink from military intervention as a last resort when our security is threatened; nor will it resile from its proper role on the world stage. Our commitment to the campaign against Daesh in Iraq and Syria is testament to that resolve. Today the United Kingdom stands united with Iraq in the face of continued terrorism. We will continue to help the Iraqi people as they defeat Daesh, reassert the territorial integrity of their country and seek to build a better future for their children.

There is no greater decision that a Prime Minister and a Cabinet can take than to commit this country to war, to ask our troops to put themselves in harm’s way on our behalf. The decision to invade Iraq and topple its Government in 2003 was among the most controversial in our nation’s recent history. It is right, therefore, that we should seek to learn the lessons from the mistakes that were made, to ensure that they are not repeated in the future.

The report of the Iraq inquiry has been a long time coming, but I think that most agree that it is a thorough, independent and exhaustive piece of work. It does not pull its punches in its analysis, and its conclusions and lessons are clearly drawn and unambiguous. As I set out earlier, I am confident that many of the most important lessons identified in the report have already been learned and the necessary responses already implemented, but in the weeks and months ahead, as we examine the report in greater detail, the Government will look further at whether any additional steps are required.

A decision to wage war is not easily reversible, so it must be carefully and diligently made with proper regard to due process and legal obligations. War itself is, of course, intrinsically dangerous, so it must be properly prepared for and the people fighting it must be properly equipped and protected. The aftermath of war is unpredictable but usually ugly, so it must be meticulously planned for and systematically executed. But, subject to those conditions, we should be clear as a nation that we will not resile from the use of military force to protect our security where all other options have failed.

Sir John has done the nation a great service in pointing the way to ensure the proper, safe and legal use of military force. The rest is up to us.

2.33 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): If this is the Foreign Secretary’s last appearance at the Dispatch Box in his current role, he has made a typically serious and thoughtful speech for his farewell. It behoves all of us to reflect seriously and thoughtfully on the Chilcot report, and the Labour party has a duty to apologise for the mistakes made to all the families of the British servicemen and women and civilian personnel who lost their lives, to all those who suffered life-changing injuries, and to the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians who have died and are still dying today. The Leader of the Opposition has rightly done that.

If there is one grave danger that we face, it is that we will assume that all the lessons of Chilcot have been
learned. I listened carefully to the Foreign Secretary, and I am concerned about some of his statements. One draws from them that he assumes that the mistakes made in Iraq cannot be made again. Indeed, the outgoing Prime Minister, in his statement last week, seemed to pick out the same five lessons that the Foreign Secretary mentioned today and said that he felt the lessons had been learned. He seemed to say that the actions that have already been taken, such as the setting up of the National Security Council and the creation of the conflict, stability and security fund, had effectively fixed the problems that arose from the Iraq war.

**Mr Philip Hammond:** I will repeat what I actually said. I am confident that many of the most important lessons identified in the report have already been learned and the necessary responses implemented, but in the weeks and months ahead, as we examine the report in greater detail, the Government will look further at whether any additional steps are required.

**Emily Thornberry:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that, because it is important to emphasise that further lessons need to be learned, some of which I hope to address. I will not spend time repeating any of Chilcot’s factual findings, because, looking to the future, we need to consider the lessons and make sure that we do not make any of the same mistakes again. The Secretary of State for Defence will speak later about operational lessons that the military must learn, and it seems to me that there are more lessons than the five that Ministers have outlined so far.

I want to outline some of the points that jump out at us from the report. It seems to me that we have continued to make mistakes during the current Prime Minister’s time in office, and I will explain why.

On the flawed intelligence, although Chilcot finds that no deliberate attempt was made to mislead people, the intelligence on which the war was based was clearly flawed and did not justify the certainty attached to it by the Government. Has that lesson been learned? Last year, the Government asked this House to authorise military action in Syria. By contrast with Iraq in 2003, the military action did not include the deployment of ground troops.

**Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of an attempt to get the House to consider a contempt motion against Tony Blair? Does she agree that, whatever else is in the Chilcot report, it does not make a factual finding, it would become a kangaroo court, because the person accused would not be allowed to represent themselves or speak. In my view, such circumstances would fly in the face of this country’s established principles of justice. Opposition Members are particularly interested in the Human Rights Act, and in article 6, on the right to a fair trial.

**Mr Dominic Grieve** (Beaconsfield) (Con): The hon. Lady has pre-empted what I was about to say. It seems somewhat strange that some Members who rightly proclaim our need to adhere to the European convention on human rights should suggest a process that cannot meet article 6 requirements under any circumstances.

**Emily Thornberry:** I always get very worried when I agree so thoroughly with the right hon. and learned Gentleman, but I find it happening on many occasions. [Interruption.] I hear from a sedentary position, “You lawyers are all the same”, but we do agree on certain principles. Frankly, our concern is sometimes to ensure that our colleagues who are not lawyers understand these basic legal principles.

**Alex Salmond:** Instead of worrying about agreeing with Government Members, should the hon. Lady not be worrying about disagreeing with the comments that her leader made just at the weekend? Has she actually read the private notes that the former Prime Minister sent to the President of the United States of America, and compared them with his public and parliamentary remarks? Does she find the two things consistent?

**Emily Thornberry:** Chilcot considered those notes and statements over a long period. Sir John Chilcot is a man of great standing, and the report is very thoughtful, and I will not gainsay what he says. There are plenty of lessons to learn from the report, and in my view they go much further than simply focusing on one individual and what happened many years ago. What is important is what is happening now. We need to make sure that the Government make the correct decisions before intervening in other people’s countries and risking loss of life.

**Alex Salmond:** Is it the hon. Lady’s position that someone can be found in contempt of this House only if they admit that contempt? That is what she seemed to say.

**Emily Thornberry:** No. What I am saying is that there are standards that we have always upheld. For example, I believe Warren Hastings was tried by this House 200 years ago, but he was tried by judges, he was represented and he was given an opportunity to say what he had to say. We should not draw conclusions that Chilcot did not without the person involved having an opportunity to speak or be represented.

**Alex Salmond:** In that case, will the hon. Lady tell us in which court the former Prime Minister could be tried?

**Emily Thornberry:** I appreciate that there is speculation about what may or may not happen to the former Prime Minister. That is not within my brief today, speaking as the shadow Foreign Secretary and attempting to draw the lessons from Chilcot. It is important that I address
that this afternoon and leave it to others to take such legal action as they think appropriate. It will be for them to take that to the proper court, which will make a decision. We cannot, within the great traditions of our country, constitute ourselves as a court.

Last year, the Government asked this House to authorise military action in Syria. By contrast with Iraq in 2003, the deployment of ground troops was ruled out, which meant a reliance on local forces instead. I mentioned flawed intelligence; at that stage, we were told that there were 70,000 moderate rebels in Syria who would help defeat Daesh, which would force Assad to negotiate a peace agreement and step down. Many of us were sceptical about that 70,000 figure, and I was certainly one of them. That figure was produced by the Joint Intelligence Committee, and the Government declined to say which groups were included in that figure, where they were, what the definition of “moderate” was, how we could be sure that all these rebels were signed up to the coalition’s military strategy, or how they would get to the battlefield. All those questions mattered.

As the Government acknowledged, no military strategy could succeed without forces on the ground. Time will tell whether those 70,000 moderate Sunni rebels existed and whether they were in a position to fight the battles that it was claimed they would be able to. However, it seems to me that there is a parallel to be drawn between the intelligence that was relied on in relation to the 70,000 figure and the flawed intelligence that has been relied on in the past. It is therefore important for us to learn a lesson from Iraq 12 years earlier. Serious questions have been raised about the intelligence that underpins our decisions to take military action. Once again, Parliament was asked last year simply to take on trust what the Government said about intelligence.

There are further issues to consider, including a lack of ability for people to challenge things internally. Chilcot makes it clear that both civil servants and Cabinet Ministers lacked the opportunity, information and encouragement to challenge the case being made to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister says that his National Security Council has fixed all that, but if so, why does the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy say that the NSC has so far proved itself to be "a reactive body, rather than a strategic one, which seems to us to be a lost opportunity"?

That criticism is important, and we should not be complacent in the face of it.

The NSC certainly did not challenge the short-sighted and highly damaging cuts to our armed forces in the last Parliament, despite the huge and justifiable misgivings of senior military figures about the impact on our defence capabilities. Nor is there any evidence of the NSC doing anything to challenge the inadequate planning for the aftermath of the intervention in Libya, a subject that I will address shortly. Ultimately, while making progress in small ways, the NSC has failed to address the fundamental problem, which is a culture in Whitehall of overly optimistic group-think, which exposure to independent views could help us challenge. It is not good enough to say that it has been fixed, because it has not. [Interruption.] The Foreign Secretary asks how I know that. I am giving him the evidence of how I know that there is overly optimistic group-think. It is partly because of the results of decisions that have been taken, but there is more, which I will go into later in my speech.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is completely wrong in her analysis of how the NSC approached the strategic defence and security review in 2010. All the papers were put before members of the National Security Council—I was one of them—and we spent weeks reading the best possible advice. We made our decisions in the light of the very difficult economic situation that the country found itself in and the £38 billion black hole left in the defence budget by the Labour Government, but the idea that we lacked expertise before us at that time is completely wrong.

Emily Thornberry: I spent only six months in the area of defence, but although I spent a great deal of time immersing myself in it, I am not just relying on my own views in saying what a disaster the coalition’s first so-called strategic defence review was. It is not just me who thinks that. Senior military figures, not just in this country but among our allies, were very concerned about what cuts to the military budget were doing to our capability. It is my view that the second strategic defence review spent a great deal of time patching up the holes that had been created by the coalition’s first one.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is being generous in giving way. However, once again, she is wrong. The most senior military officials and soldiers in the country were at the table for the first security and defence review. They were part of the discussion; they were not locked out.

Emily Thornberry: The right hon. Gentleman has had his opportunity to put his views on the record, and I am sure that he will speak later. My view is that if things had been fixed in the way that the Foreign Secretary has stated, we would not be swinging backwards and forwards on our military budget. We make cuts and create holes in our defence capability, then the next time we try to patch them up.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): As one of the Defence Ministers at the time, let me say that it was a most unpleasant experience, as a Conservative, having to make cuts in our armed forces. However, the truth was that the Budget deficit we inherited of £156 billion was itself a threat to our national security. We had to take action. Sadly, defence had to take some of those cuts. Where would the hon. Lady have made cuts, if not in defence?

Emily Thornberry: We are moving a long way from the lessons that need to be drawn from Chilcot, and if I may, I will return to my speech. The hon. Gentleman and I have discussed defence on many occasions. I always enjoy the discussions, and I am quite happy to take his points at another time. However, I do not want to spend the entire afternoon discussing defence, much as I am well able to. I simply say that if the NSC has brought in outside perspectives from time to time, it has clearly not done so enough to deal with the underlying problem.
Another issue that comes out in Chilcot, and that has not been fixed, is the lack of challenge in Parliament. That was the other potential source of challenge to the Government. Although there were vigorous debates in the House, those debates and the 217 MPs who voted to indicate that the case had not been made were ultimately not enough to stop the march to war. I was not yet in the House; I was on the demonstrations. Although more Labour MPs than MPs from any other political party voted against the war, there were not enough of us to stop it.

Have we moved on since then? Many people have said that the 2013 vote against taking action in Syria was a watershed moment. It cemented the convention that whatever the views of the Executive, this House has the final say. The House was asked to approve a broad mandate for the use of military force without a coherent strategy, clear objectives or a long-term plan. It was all too reminiscent of the approach to Iraq. Members from all parts of the House exercised a healthy degree of scepticism, and they were right to do so.

At the same time, the Government have increasingly taken advantage of loopholes in that convention to intervene in more conflicts with less oversight. They have developed military capability in cyberspace, but they refuse to say in what circumstances it might be used or when Parliament might be informed. They have increased investment in drones and special forces at a time when there have been many cuts to other parts of the armed forces. They have shown a willingness to use both as a means of intervening in conflicts to which the UK is not a party; that has included the use of special forces in quasi-conventional combat roles. In doing so, the Government seek to bypass not only parliamentary support for their interventions but any form of parliamentary oversight. The development of hybrid warfare demands new mechanisms for holding the Executive to account. All parties, on both sides of the House, should be working on developing those mechanisms, because as we all know, hybrid warfare is likely to be the future.

**Mr James Gray** (North Wiltshire) (Con): Does the hon. Lady acknowledge that there is at least an argument that to use the whipping system to secure a parliamentary majority for a predetermined war emasculates the House of Commons rather than empowers it, because it prevents Back-Bench Members of Parliament from thereafter holding the Government to account? Does she agree that there might be an argument in favour of introducing some kind of UK war powers Act to get around that difficulty?

**Emily Thornberry**: There is continuing debate about the matter. As long as we can be confident that a decision made in this House will not need to be taken off to the courts, for the judges, eventually, to decide whether we go to war—that would be entirely inappropriate—and as long as we can keep control of any such legislation so that it ensures that, where possible, the Government will come to Parliament and allow us to express our view, I think that that is right.

I understand that this is the system that we have at the moment, but I am concerned that although the convention continues to develop and strengthen as time goes on, it is still in the gift of the Executive to decide whether they will bring the matter to Parliament. There is an argument for putting the convention on a more formal footing, but there is the danger of court intervention. It is a moot point, and something that we must continue to look at.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s strategic lesson in the modern combat capability of Her Majesty’s armed forces. I was interested in her description of the use of special forces in almost-combat capability. Having served with various parts of Her Majesty’s forces in the past, I know that most foreign deployments are considered to be near to combat even if they are in a training role, because of the pressures on them. It is a very novel interpretation to suggest that hybrid warfare may not continue to exist.

We are getting into a rather bizarre discussion, if the hon. Lady will forgive me for saying so, on the strategy and use of the armed forces, when surely the focus should be on the legality and the appropriateness of the deployment. It might be best to stick to the areas that the House is qualified to talk about, rather than to dress up as armchair generals and pretend that we know what is going on in different areas.

**Emily Thornberry**: It is important that we look to tomorrow’s problems. Special forces are likely to be used increasingly. On the idea that we will send, for example, special forces into Libya in a training capacity, I agree with the hon. Gentleman about how that might end up a quasi-combat role. Presumably, if the training forces are in Libya, they will be in a camp. They may be in a part of Libya that is allegedly safe, but they will need to be guarded. Who will guard them? We can see how it is possible to slide down a slippery slope. At the moment, although it would be inappropriate in the case of a decision to send special forces or trainers into an area, if we can have parliamentary scrutiny of our secret service—if the behaviour of MI5 and MI6 is at least answerable to a Committee of this House—it is not beyond our wit to allow there to be similar accountability over special forces. I have written about this issue.

**Mr Philip Hammond**: It is important to point out that the oversight that the Intelligence and Security Committee, prominent members of which are present, exercises over the intelligence community is always post the fact. The only kind of meaningful oversight over special force deployment of the type that the hon. Lady is talking about would have to be before the fact. That would be a very different proposition.

**Emily Thornberry**: I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for making that point. I do not expect special forces, before they are used, to have to go before a Committee of Parliament and get permission, but I do think that there should be some form of accountability and some explanation. It was embarrassing, and it demonstrated the democratic deficit in relation to hybrid warfare, to read in the papers that the King of Jordan was gossiping with Congressmen in America about our special forces, when nobody in this House had officially been told about it. That highlights the democratic deficit in this country. We should learn lessons from Chilcot. We should learn lessons about accountability and about
not simply trusting the Executive to get a decision right. We should make sure that there is more accountability, and that we are on our toes. We must be prepared to modernise our structures as necessary to reflect the changing nature of warfare in the 21st century.

Let me go back to my speech. I talked about the development of hybrid warfare and new mechanisms for holding the Executive to account, and I believe that all parties should work together on that. Another point was raised about American-British relations. Chilcot made it clear that American-British relations would not have been harmed had the UK not joined the US-led coalition. Chilcot argues that that was not a basis for joining the invasion. In my view, that is another lesson that we have not learned. In 2013, pressure from the United States played a major role in the Government’s rush to intervene in Syria. It became obvious that the US Administration’s efforts to persuade Congress to back intervention hinged on the Prime Minister’s success in persuading Parliament to do so. Speaking after our back intervention hinged on the Prime Minister’s success in persuading Parliament to do so. Speaking after our House declined to support the action in Syria, the then Defence Secretary—now the Foreign Secretary—said that the vote would “certainly” damage the Anglo-American relationship. In my view, the relationship has endured. We have got over it without any adverse consequences, and it serves as a reminder that our alliance with the United States rests on stronger foundations than an expectation of unquestioning British compliance with American wishes.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Lady speaks of the special relationship, and I would be the first to acknowledge that the relationship with the United States goes much deeper than one incident or one vote, but is it not also valid to listen to the words of various American generals, including General Jim Mattis, who, as she knows, commanded Centcom? After the vote, he pointed to the damaging impact that it would have on the enduring commitment and understanding between the US and British militaries. Does she recognise that just as that special relationship is made up of many threads, undermining it thread by thread will weaken it?

Emily Thornberry: I am sure that some American generals were disappointed that Harold Wilson would not agree to British involvement in Vietnam, but we got over it and our relationship is strong enough to endure differences of opinion. If we are to be good friends, it is important to recognise that good friends trust each other enough to disagree at times. The 2013 Syria vote made it clear that Parliament understood that; it also suggested that the Government did not. That is why it is such a tragedy that cuts to the Foreign Office budget have weakened Whitehall’s institutional knowledge of the world. It is important for our leadership role in the world to have proper understanding of it, and for hundreds of years we have had an insight into the world that other countries have not had. We have a leadership role, and we can have a voice that is different from that of the Americans because we will have a different understanding. To have 16% cuts in the Foreign Office year on year, and a hollowing out of our institutional knowledge, has in my view been a tragedy.

Tom Tugendhat: I am sorry but the hon. Gentleman has already intervened twice. I am taking a very long time, and I ought to get on with it.

Chilcot says that Tony Blair ignored warnings about the sectarian violence that would sweep Iraq after Saddam fell, and after the appalling loss of life that has followed in Iraq and surrounding countries, we are still very much living with that mistake. Again, has that lesson been learned? If we consider the intervention in Libya, it is clear that it has not been. During the uprising against Gaddafi, armed militias across the country focused their attention on toppling the regime, and the British Government later seemed almost surprised that once that goal had been achieved, those militias turned their fire on each other. Although divisions in Libya were always more tribal than the sectarian divisions in Iraq, the result has been the same. The belief that democratic elections would help to fill the power vacuum proved hopelessly optimistic, when factions that found themselves in the minority simply refused to accept that the result was legitimate.

Had those with knowledge of the country been directly consulted at the time, they would have warned the Government that such things would happen. Had informed and impartial advice been sought out, such warnings were readily available and in the public domain. It was also clear to many experts in the region that if Gaddafi was toppled there was a huge risk of knock-on instability when well-armed, highly trained mercenaries returned to their native countries such as Mali, Niger and Chad. Again, the warnings were there, but such advice was either not heard or not listened to until it was too late. Again, a parallel can be drawn between our intervention in Libya and our understanding of what would happen next and listening to experts, and what happened in our first intervention in Iraq when we did not listen to expertise or pay attention to what was said.

Mr Philip Hammond: First, the intervention in Libya was at the request of the Arab League, which I suggest would have had an insight into the region and would count as people who knew what was going on. Secondly, although I understand the hon. Lady’s analysis, does that lead to the conclusion that toppling any despot always runs the risk of creating chaos and confusion? That is the nature of despotism. We are five years down the line from ending a 40-year brutal dictatorship in Libya. The game is not over yet, but I predict that Libya will end up a better place than it was under Gaddafi.

Emily Thornberry: It is interesting to hear what the right hon. Gentleman says, but that issue is one of speculation. In my view it is not legal to intervene in a country to topple a regime, and morally we should not intervene in a country unless we have some form of strategy to ensure that the country we leave is in a better state than when we first arrived.

Mr Grieve: When I was in government I had some involvement in the Libyan intervention, and from memory I do not think that there was a blinding of oneself to potential problems as a result of that intervention. We must also bear it in mind that the trigger for the intervention was the fact that Colonel Gaddafi was about to kill tens of thousands of his own citizens. That prompted the Security Council resolution that provided
the legal basis for the intervention. That highlights, I will come on to speak about this—some of the really difficult decisions in those areas, where even questions of legality do not come into it. I certainly would not be willing to characterise that intervention as having been wrong in the circumstances that prevailed at the time.

Emily Thornberry: I hear what the right hon. and learned Gentleman says, but my point is that, again, information was available and could have informed the intervention. Once the initial intervention had been made, what happened thereafter? How were manifest and obvious dangers protected against? I do not think that those important points were considered, and again we learn a lesson from Chilcot and Iraq that is so much more important that any form of soap opera regarding Tony Blair or not Tony Blair.

The other important issue is post-war planning, some of which has been touched on—this is my final point, Mr Speaker, as everyone will be glad to hear. Perhaps most devastatingly, Chilcot highlights the total absence of adequate planning for what would happen after the war and the long-term strategy for Iraq. If ever a mistake should never be repeated, it is the idea that we enter into another military intervention with no idea of its consequences, no plan for the aftermath, and no long-term strategy. And yet, that is the exact hallmark of all the outgoing Prime Minister’s interventions.

Again, we see the evidence in Libya. In the words of President Obama, the Prime Minister became “distracted”, and once the Gaddafi regime had been overthrown, the lengthy, arduous task of post-war reconstruction was all but ignored. In the years since, Libya has been riven by factionalism and violence. Its experiment with democracy was brief, with power in the hands of rival militias, and the ungoverned space that that created was an invitation for Daesh to establish a strategic foothold on the Libyan coast. It is a stain on this Government that they began to pay real attention to the mess they had left in Libya only once that terrorist threat from Daesh became too urgent to ignore.

Joanna Cherry: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady has said anything about Chilcot’s findings on the circumstances in which it was ultimately decided that there was a legal basis for UK participation in Iraq, but he says that they were far from satisfactory. I am sure she will agree with me and endorse the view presented earlier that the Attorney General should give independent and impartial advice. According to evidence to the Committee, Chilcot details how the then Attorney General initially resisted the legality, and eventually acquiesced in the view that the use of military force against Iraq could be legally justified. Has the hon. Lady formed a view about what changed the then Attorney General’s mind?

Emily Thornberry: Tempting though it is to debate that issue with the hon. and learned Lady, it is important to note that any Attorney General knows that they are the only person in the Cabinet who can say to the Prime Minister, “No. You can’t do that. It is not legal. You are not allowed to.” That heavy burden must be exercised by people of great courage and substance. It is about the rule of law and the fact that no one is above the law. All AGs need to learn that lesson, and they must be confident and capable of standing up to their leader. That is an important point and perhaps another lesson.

Britain has always been a leading light in the development of international law, and much international law has been a result of documents that we have drafted. Our adherence to international law has been a very important part in its development. One thing that has been clouded, as a result of the Iraq intervention and other interventions since, has been the need for a clear law on the circumstances in which one can and cannot intervene. That has not developed as well as it might have if there had not been a temptation to try to press the facts into what is understood of the law. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) is a big fan of the Responsibility to Protect. The effect the Iraq war had on the development of RtoP is very sad: Cook was attempting to develop it at the time of the Iraq war and it was held up as a result of the intervention in Iraq. Were the lessons on long-term planning from Iraq learned in Libya? I would say absolutely not. The central lesson is this: you cannot bomb a country from 30,000 feet into a western-style democracy.

In conclusion, we cannot turn the clock back. We cannot correct the mistakes that were made. We cannot bring back the lives that were lost. We cannot undo the chaos we have created, but we can, and we must, stop those mistakes being repeated. Unfortunately, as I have pointed out today, whatever his rhetoric and whatever his well-meaning intentions, too often the outgoing Prime Minister has repeated exactly the same mistakes in his own military interventions: relying on speculative intelligence, keeping Parliament in the dark, and failing to plan for what happens afterwards. It is to be hoped that the new Prime Minister will study the Chilcot report not as a commentary on decisions made in the past but as a guide to the decisions she will have to make. Let us hope she does so. As she takes on her new and onerous responsibilities, we wish her well.

3.12 pm

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): The decision to invade Iraq was the most disastrous foreign policy decision taken by this country in my lifetime. It did not cause, but it greatly contributed to, the extraordinary problems that have persisted in the middle east and the wider world ever since. I fear it will continue to have tragic consequences for some years to come.

First, we all owe a debt to Sir John Chilcot for producing what will undoubtedly be the most authoritative analysis of how on earth such an appalling blunder came to be made. I certainly have not had the chance to get much beyond the executive summary and just a little bit of the rest of it. It will take a long time before anybody in this House gets through the millions of words that have been produced. The lessons for the inquiry into the Iraq war will be of benefit in particular to specialists: those in the military, the intelligence service, the diplomatic corps and politicians—Ministers, shadow Ministers and those who hold the Government to account—for many years to come. It is too soon to follow up on his extremely formidable findings, which I am sure are correct, but there is a role for this House to begin to consider, as we are, its political aspect.
Sir John Chilcot has examined the formal records, meetings and processes. He analysed them to see what happened, but he is not a politician. The House of Commons and the Ministers involved are able to look at this with a slightly different eye. Why did people reach particular decisions? What is it that makes us want to reach those decisions? Where did it go wrong, in particular as far as the collective system of Cabinet Government is concerned, and the accountability, through Parliament, to the wider public? Because Sir John Chilcot is not a politician, I am not sure that he is able to answer on the wider perspective.

I would like to begin by agreeing with one point made by the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) and say how irrelevant it has been to try to turn all this into a witch hunt against celebrity individuals who were involved at the time. That is one of the great failures of political debate in our day. As far as the wider media and the world were concerned, the recent referendum debate was largely the Dave and Boris show. It is quite pointless to say, “Let’s persecute Tony Blair. He was in charge. Are we going to censure him? Is he going to be prosecuted as a war criminal?” and all the rest of it. That is also true for all the other individuals involved.

The one thing the report makes quite clear is that nobody has committed any crime. As one who was present at the time, I have absolutely no doubt that anybody acted on any other basis than that they believed passionately they were acting in the public interest. One of the great things about Tony Blair was that he did believe passionately in what he was doing at the time. Never had a doubt about what he was doing, so I am not surprised that he continues to protest as strongly as he does. He has not changed his mind. He believed he was acting in the national interest in cementing our alliance with the Americans. He thought that was absolutely key to our security. He thought that a British contribution would help the Americans with planning, advocacy and so on. He firmly believed that just removing Saddam Hussein was a virtuous act that would make the world a better place—he still does.

Then, as now, regime change is the point on which he gets most passionate. He really thinks—he is probably right; I agree with him, actually—that he got rid of an evil regime. I agree with those who say that that was not in itself a totally adequate achievement. He certainly believed that the regime had weapons of mass destruction. I faced him in the House, intervening on him and so on. I remember one day thinking, “This is the last man still living who still believes they are going to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.” It was increasingly obvious to everyone else that no such material was going to be found. Pursuing Tony Blair is a complete irrelevance to what the House should be looking at.

Mr Clarke: I will give way briefly to the hon. Lady. Lady, but I am not on the Front Bench and cannot keep on giving way as previous speakers have. I hope everybody understands that.

Caroline Lucas: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way and agree with him on the dangers of focusing on just one person. We need to focus on that person, but we also need to focus on the system. However, I worry about the way in which the right hon. and learned Gentleman appears to be letting that one person off any real responsibility for misleading the House. We only have to read Chilcot to see, for example, how Blair misled the House about the position of the French. The motion Blair moved in the House stated that, “it has not proved possible to secure a second Resolution in the UN because one Permanent Member of the Security Council made plain in public its intention to use its veto whatever the circumstances”.—[Official Report, 18 March 2003; Vol. 401, c. 760.] Yet within a few minutes, even before Prime Minister’s questions, the French were on the phone to Tony Blair saying, “You are deliberately misrepresenting our position.” This happens time and again in the Chilcot report, so while we should not focus only on one man, let us not let him off the hook completely. That does not do any of us any good.

Mr Clarke: I certainly did not rise to defend Tony Blair, but he is not the first politician to make a mistake and he will not be the last. If the hon. Lady believes the French, she believes the French. The French were able to exercise a veto in the Security Council. It was a mistake at the time to try to blame the French entirely. They were never going to get a majority in the Security Council, but the French were adamantly.—[Interruption.]

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The House must come to order. The right hon. and learned Gentleman has made it perfectly plain that at this point he is not giving way. Therefore, the House must listen to the development of his argument.

Mr Clarke: Mr Speaker, I have already spent more time than I intended to on Tony Blair. Members who wish to argue about the French veto in 2003 can do so between themselves.

The political background to what was being decided and what the politicians wanted to do was key. I was a Back-Bench Opposition Member at the time, but I followed the events with some care. I had one advantage: I did not have access to what was going on inside the Government, but I knew a lot of American, as well as British, politicians. At various political gatherings—Bilderberg, Davos and so on—I knew and was on friendly terms with quite a few of the key American neo-cons. I was arguing against the merits of the invasion of Iraq before the debate even started here.

That is important background. In the Bush Administration, the key policy makers wanted to invade Iraq immediately after 9/11. By 2001, there was not the slightest doubt that they would invade. They had a rather naive, idealistic approach that faintly shocked me: they thought the previous Administration had not used American military power for all the benefits it could produce in the world, but they were going to use it for good, and they thought they would be treated as liberating heroes when they arrived in Baghdad and set up a better regime.
They thought that a man called Chalabi would win the election held thereafter. I met Chalabi once or twice. He once got about 2% in an Iraqi election. They thought he would be in charge but that he would need supervision, so there was going to be a US general—constant comparisons were made with General MacArthur turning Imperial Japan into a democracy after the war. Much was also made of the importance of denazification following Hitler’s fall, hence there was going to be de-Ba’athification in Iraq to get rid of all these people in the army and the security services and so on. The House will be reassured to know that I fiercely disagreed. I liked these people, but my thought, during such a discussion, was always, “One of us isn’t on the same planet.” I formed a fairly hostile view, therefore, long before it arrived here.

If I knew in 2001 that the Bush Administration was going to invade Iraq, I am quite certain that Tony Blair and the British military knew, and that they had a long time to work out how they were going to join in. That explains a lot. Why did the Americans want the British to join in? They did not need us for military purposes. They could defeat the Iraqis without our military assistance. They did not rate our military that highly—although they thought our special forces and inteligences were very good—but we were a very valuable political ally. They thought that the presentation would be greatly improved if the British, of all people, were at the heart of the alliance, and as I have said, Tony Blair was very keen to join them. I doubt he bought all the neo-con theories, but he clearly thought that getting rid of Saddam Hussein’s regime was one of the best contributions he could make to the future of the Iraqi people and he was determined to join in.

Reading these mysteries, one must ask, “What was the snag for Tony Blair and the Government?” I am confident I knew enough, through my contacts, to know that the snag for Tony Blair, who wanted to take part and who—it seems—had already told George W. Bush that he wanted to take part, was that it was not legal for the UK to take part in a war being launched for the purpose of changing the regime in another country. When he received that advice, with which I think every lawyer in the place agreed, it was undoubtedly right.

As somebody said, however, that was not the view the Americans took. American neo-cons are not so impressed with international law. Their constitution does not constrain them. I once had a key American official tell me, “We have all the legal authority we need to invade: we have a large majority in both Houses of Congress.” And that was it. But they were so keen to have the British that they were prepared to give ‘Tony Blair some time to tackle this problem of whether it was lawful for him to take part, and to work out a basis upon which the British could join.

At this point, I think, these people’s motives were virtuous. They believed all this. They were making the world a better place by removing a tyrant and installing a pro-American, pro-western, pro-Israeli, democratic Government in a liberal society. They were going to change the regime, and we were going to do it lawfully, so we had to turn to the question of the dreadful weapons that Saddam Hussein undoubtedly had used against his own people years before, and whether they had all been disposed of or whether we could demonstrate that he was a continuing threat. If we could demonstrate that he had weapons of mass destruction, that they were a threat to British interests and our neighbours, and that he was not co-operating with weapons inspections and so on, and if we could get a UN resolution, then we had a legal basis for invading.

Once one realises that that was the—perfectly worthy and well-intentioned—mindset of most of the British people taking part in the process to intervene, one can understand why some of these extraordinary processes happened. I personally believe that the American Administration delayed the invasion for a month or two.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Two months.

Mr Clarke: Two months, says my right hon. Friend. They delayed the invasion to give the British more time to get through this convoluted legal stuff—I use sarcastic words of the kind the occasional impatient American used at the time—before they could join in. The problem was that the Americans, although they went to the UN and got resolution 1441 and all the rest of it, began to lose patience, seeing that this could go on forever, and it reached the stage where they were going to invade in March 2003. They could not wait any longer. The Blair Government—those who knew what was going on—had to speed the thing up a bit, realising that if they were not careful, they would fail to get there in time.

One thing that surprises me in the Chilcot report concerns the advice the Government got from the Joint Intelligence Committee, which eventually produced enough intelligence that was plausible and no doubt believed by those putting it in the reports for the Attorney General to be persuaded—obviously quite reluctantly—that there probably was a basis for going ahead. The urgent debates then took place in this House, the last one being about two days before the date when everyone knew the troops, already in battle positions in the middle east, were about to go ahead with the operation.

We should learn the political lessons from all that. One of the first lessons relates to the ever-increasing rush to get into the position of being able to invade lawfully, so that everybody wanted to be persuaded that various things were correct and that various steps had been taken. If they had submitted themselves to slower, more challenged and more careful consideration, however, it would have led to a different conclusion.

What, then, is the outline of the main political lessons to be learned from all this? First, the American alliance should not be entered into blindly. Let me say briefly that I am as passionate a believer as Tony Blair that our alliance with the United States is crucial to this country’s future security and role in the world. There is not a trace of anti-Americanism in what I am saying; our alliance is one of the most valuable features of our foreign policy. That does not mean, however, that we should allow ourselves to go along blindly and always—right or wrong—with what the American President of the day wishes to do. I take that no further, but we might have a President Trump, so it is a question worth bearing in mind. I agree with the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) that the American alliance will not be destroyed—it might
be damaged for a month or two—if we do not absolutely go along with what the American President wants us to do.

Let me move on to something that is clear in Chilcot—though I have not made the point myself—and was plain to see in how the Ministry of Defence behaved at the time. The advice of our defence chiefs is hugely important, and I share the support for and pride in them that keeps being expressed in these debates. Yet—subconsciously, I am sure—they always want to take part in any military activity that the Americans want them to join. It might be considered advice, but it always comes down to “We must ask the Americans to let us make as big a contribution as we can.” A trained military man is trained for the purpose of using military force in the national interest and further worthwhile objectives, and cannot help thinking, “This is our moment; this is the great action in which we must take part.”

It is the same with the intelligence services. They prize their relationship with the Americans above all other relationships they have with the outside world. They are dependent on co-operation in some ways, but they are anxious to please and to do what they think their American colleagues wish them to do. In this particular case, we had a Prime Minister and a Government who wanted to enter the war, so everybody was extremely anxious to find the facts, to be convinced of the situation and to enable the Prime Minister to go ahead and do what he wanted. That is an essential point, but it requires a simple politician like me to make it; it does not appear in the pages of the Chilcot report. When one is raising one’s eyebrows at what happened, I think that that answers a lot.

Particularly at the time we are talking about—and sometimes still today—there were not enough diplomats involved. There was not enough looking at the expertise of the Foreign Office. We had a lot of Arabists. The Americans had some, but they got rid of most of theirs and brought people in who had been involved in the Nicaraguan episode because they were seen as being ideologically more sound. Americans did not like the Arabists we had in the Foreign Office because they kept complicating things by talking about tribes and different sorts of Muslim, which the policy makers in Washington thought were irrelevant to the new era of western democracy in which they thought they were going to take the country.

Tom Tugendhat: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr Clarke: I am sorry, but I do not have the time.

I shall not go on by adding more to the strictures about the Attorney General—[HON. MEMBERS: “Go on!”]. The Attorney General was obviously giving the right advice. I am sitting alongside someone who was a very tough Attorney General—my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve)—who would not give the advice that eager Prime Ministers sometimes want, and neither would Michael Havers or quite a few others I recall being in government with. As has been said, that is what the Attorney General is for. I know Lord Goldsmith and he is perfectly all right. He must have felt so exposed in the end that he gave into the temptation to say, “Well, it’s just about lawful; it is just about satisfactorily proved.”

I am sorry to have taken a little longer than I intended, but let me conclude with my main point. The big thing that matters—and it matters very much as we are having a change of Government today—is how the Cabinet and Government processes come into the equation. What about accountability to Parliament? It was obvious at the time, obvious if anyone listened to what the Foreign Secretary said publicly, obvious in what half the Labour party said and obvious from listening to officials that Cabinet Government was not working properly in Tony Blair’s Government. He went in for sofa government. Margaret Thatcher got keener and keener on sofa government towards the end of her time, but Tony Blair had taken it to an art form by the time he got into issues such as Iraq. It was the same with Parliament. There was a reluctance to come to Parliament. Both were essentially seen as hurdles to be surmounted. Once you had your policy, how were you going to get it through the Cabinet and how were you going to get it past Parliament?

My suggestion for the future is that we should all agree that that is not the mindset that people should have. They should set the proposition, and, of course, advocate it to the Cabinet, and then, with the benefit of proper information, they should listen to it being debated and examined by those who have time to do so. Similarly, Parliament should be consulted when it can be, and given proper information. One should not rely on clever timing of the debate and the work of the Whips to get it through and afterwards say that there is a democratic endorsement. I have no time to apply all my strong strictures to the circumstances of the time, but I think that, if read with my arguments in mind, the Chilcot report feeds the impression that I had then, as someone who participated in debates.

Military action is difficult. There is no point in politicians being lightheartedly irresponsible and saying, “We have got to be involved in every decision.” There will be occasions when that is not possible. There will be occasions when someone has just attacked a British interest, and we have to fight back. You can tell the Cabinet and you can tell Parliament afterwards, and any sensible Cabinet and any sensible Parliament will of course endorse it. But this was not an emergency. For two years our allies had told us that they were going to invade Iraq. It had been planned. It had been worked on. It had been discussed. The reason there was not full Cabinet discussion, and the reason there was not timely parliamentary debate, was that someone who did that might not get it by them. We did not start debating the issue until Parliament until February 2003, and the final, key vote took place when the troops were in the field. That put a lot of Conservatives off the idea of voting against it, when they might otherwise have done so. Our boys were about to go into action, the next day—which is what occurred.

Some of those matters have been addressed. The National Security Council is a hugely beneficial innovation introduced by my right hon. Friend the outgoing Prime Minister, who is probably already the ex-Prime Minister. Now is not the time to debate it, but it still needs to be improved. It has not covered everything, although it is a lot better than it was. As for Cabinet government, I
think that my right hon. Friends should ask themselves—if they are still in office under the next Prime Minister—whether they can ensure that adequate time is given to discuss things, and adequate information is given in advance. Cabinet government does not mean moving quickly from item to item; people must have some papers beforehand so that they can consider the issues properly.

The National Security Council is very valuable, because it contains defence and intelligence people alongside the politicians. I genuinely congratulate the outgoing Prime Minister: some of the best discussions in which I participated took place in the National Security Council, with my total approval. However, although I may be too sensitive, I think that it could be improved sometimes. There are occasions when a fait accompli is brought there and explained to you, and the defence and intelligence people explain why you should agree, and off you go.

I think it right to look into why we might have avoided what happened in Libya. The whole history of the middle east and north Africa involves our removing fascist dictatorships of the most poisonous kind from country after country, and then being surprised when they have been replaced by a situation that is, in some instances, even worse than the one that we have removed. A continuing answer to that problem needs to be sought, although at present we may have to confront even bigger problems.

I began by saying that this was the biggest foreign policy disaster of my time. We all have to ask why the institutions of the United Kingdom failed even to develop a hint of that. It was not particularly courageous for the House to vote in favour. Opinion polls showed that 70% of the British public supported the invasion. For the first week or two it was extremely popular. Had we held a referendum, which is now the fashionable way of governing the country—compared with this old-fashioned parliamentary democracy—it would have sailed through with an enormous majority. The danger of following the parliamentary democracy—not of referendums, but of parliamentary democracy—that the votes on Iraq that day illustrated.

I have been checking the record, and I think I can honestly say that I do not think I have ever quoted The Times in 30 years in this place, off and on, but I will quote it today, because I thought its headline and first paragraph on the Chilcot report last Thursday absolutely hit the mark. Under the headline “Blair’s private war”, it wrote:

“Britain fought an unnecessary, disastrous and potentially illegal war in Iraq because of Tony Blair’s misguided and personal commitment to George W Bush, the Chilcot report concluded yesterday.”

It would be impossible to read the Chilcot report without looking at that personal level of accountability as well as the wider context of the legality.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman reminded us that public opinion at that stage was in favour of war, and those of us who spoke against it from the SNP, Plaid Cymru or Liberal Benches were not given a particularly easy time. I looked at the contribution that day of Charles Kennedy, who was barracked throughout his speech against war. “Chamberlain Charlie” was one of the more printable epithets, and the “toast of Baghdad” was flung at some of us who opposed the war.

I say that not just to make the point that Members such as the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe and others who argued against the war have been vindicated, but also to remind people of the nature and context of the debate we were engaged in. There are only 179 Members in this Parliament who were Members of Parliament on 18 March 2003; a little over a quarter of Members of this Parliament were present and voting in that debate. It is as well that people remember and understand the context if we are to understand the failings of parliamentary democracy—not of referendums, but of parliamentary democracy—that the votes on Iraq that day illustrated.

There are Members sitting here now who were here at that time. I remember the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) organising some of the opposition on the day I spoke in February. We voted against it, and we spoke against it. Needless to say, I have looked at my speech, and I am very sad to say that I think I predicted quite a lot of the consequences and what would happen. We all agree that, “Never again if we can avoid it,” but this is a big subject and it is no good reading the report and just saying we should have a look at the intelligence arrangements; we should have a look at other arrangements as well, such as the way our Government are run, the way this Parliament organises itself, and how we get sensible accountability to the House of Commons the next time the Government have to engage in such difficult decisions.

3.41 pm

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): The parliamentary wounds of the Iraq war are still pertinent in today’s debate, but we should remember that they are as nothing compared with the wounds of the 179 families who lost servicepeople, the 23 British civilian staff who were killed, the 200,000 Iraqis and the thousands of American soldiers. The carnage in the middle east is still with us today—these wounds are still raw and open.

Like the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), I looked back at the debate on 18 March 2003, and I was struck by a number of things that we do not always remember. We all remember Robin Cook’s brilliant resignation speech of the day before, but we do not necessarily remember John Denham’s distinguished and measured contribution on the day of the debate.

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It would be impossible to read the Chilcot report without looking at that personal level of accountability as well as the wider context of the legality.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe started his speech by saying that this was not all about Tony Blair, but the rest of his speech illustrated why it is in fact very largely about Tony Blair. I want to quote from the executive summary of the Chilcot report, but these points are backed up enormously in the full report. On pages 58 and 59, Chilcot goes through the sequence of decision making between December 2001 and the immediate onset of the war. It would appear that if those decisions were the product of sofa government, it was a very small sofa indeed. Crucial decisions about the strategies and alliances involved were made by the Prime Minister and only a very few of his advisers. Chilcot finds that not even a Cabinet Committee discussed the crucial decisions listed on pages 58 and 59. The list starts with:

“The decision at the beginning of December 2001 to offer to work with President Bush on a strategy to deal with Iraq as part
of Phase 2 of the ‘War on Terror’, despite the fact that there was no evidence of any Iraqi involvement with the attacks on the United States or active links to Al Qaida.”

It goes right through to:

“A review of UK policy at the end of February 2003 when the inspectors had found no evidence of WMD and there was only limited support for the second resolution in the Security Council.”

All those crucial decisions were made without reference even to a Cabinet Sub-Committee and without a range of colleagues in the Cabinet being consulted.

When the former Deputy Prime Minister concluded last weekend—in a way that Chilcot was not allowed to do, either because of his remit or because of the lack of specialisms on the inquiry—that the war was illegal and apologised for it, he should actually have been apologising for the fact that all this was allowed to happen through a sequence of decisions taken over 15 months by one individual, the Prime Minister, and his advisers without any account being taken of any kind of collective responsibility.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does Chilcot not also say that that form of government should be described as a “professional forum”, and that it should not be regarded as just advisers and cronies? Was not that the specific point of the evidence that Lord Turnbull gave to Chilcot?

Alex Salmond: I am dealing with the findings of Chilcot—

Steve McCabe: So am I.

Alex Salmond: The report states:

“The Inquiry considers that there should have been a collective discussion by a Cabinet Committee or small group of Ministers on the basis of inter-departmental advice agreed at a senior level between officials on a number of decision points”.

That is in paragraph 409 on page 58, if that helps the hon. Gentleman.

Steve McCabe: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Salmond: I have answered the hon. Gentleman’s question. If he will let me continue, perhaps I will give way again later—

Steve McCabe: In paragraph 402—

Mr Speaker: Order. We cannot conduct debate with people yelling from a sedentary position in a disorderly manner, and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) must not do that. If the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) wants to give way later, he will, and if he does not, he will not. We will see how things go.

Alex Salmond: If the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) had been able to give evidence to Chilcot, no doubt the report would have concluded otherwise. However, we now have the report as it has been concluded. I am not talking about individual pieces of evidence; I am talking about the conclusion of the Chilcot inquiry itself. This is why The Times was undoubtedly right to describe the events as “Blair’s private war”.

On the question of collective responsibility in this place, I fundamentally disagree with the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe on one point. If Parliament is to hold future Executives to account, it will not just be a question of changing the process of decision making, although I accept that some changes have been made. I do not accept the Foreign Secretary’s confidence that the mistakes could never be repeated, and I do not believe that his distinction between a land campaign in Iraq and an aerial bombardment in Libya fully explains why this country—never mind its allies—spent 13 times as much on bombing Libya as we spent on the budget for reconstruction in Libya. That might be a lesson that has not been carried forward. The changes that must be made relate not only to the process of government but to parliamentary accountability, the most fundamental aspect of which is Parliament deciding whether it has been misled.

Ian Austin: The fact is that Libya was already in a brutal civil war before western air forces prevented Gaddafi from slaughtering innocent people—women and children—in Benghazi. That was what was happening. The question that the right hon. Gentleman has to answer is what he would have done to help those women and children in Benghazi. [Interruption.]

Alex Salmond: As the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) says from a sedentary position, I probably would not have supplied arms to people like that over a period of time. Not doing oil deals in a tent with Colonel Gaddafi might have been another thing.

Ian Austin rose—

Alex Salmond: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I want to make my speech.

My point was about the lesson of reconstruction, not the argument for the conflict. It is fair to point out that this country spent 13 times as much bombing Libya as we did on the budget for the reconstruction of Libya. That might provide a lesson about the priority given to the aftermath of conflict, and I am unsure whether the Foreign Secretary has taken it fully on board.

This is about not just the process of government but parliamentary accountability—that is the most fundamental point of all. Parliament has held people to account in the relatively recent past—there was Profumo and the sex scandal, and if I remember correctly, Stephen Byers was accused of misleading Parliament because he nationalised a railway company. Those things were no doubt important, and that line of accountability is crucial, but how much more important is the line of accountability on peace or war, when hundreds of thousands of people lose their lives as a result of decisions made by the Executive?

My contention is that Chilcot provides a huge array of evidence for a lack of parliamentary truthfulness, in that one thing was being said to the President of the United States and quite a different thing was being said to Parliament and the people. That did not happen in just a single speech or parliamentary statement, although the immediate run-up to the war provides ample and...
Sir John Chilcot concludes, on the meaning of the memo:

“Mr Blair’s Note, which had not been discussed or agreed with his colleagues, set the UK on a path leading to diplomatic activity in the UN and the possibility of participation in military action in a way that would make it very difficult for the UK subsequently to withdraw its support for the US.”

But that was not what Parliament was being told at the same time. Parliament was not told of assurances to George W. Bush on military action. Parliament was told that the Prime Minister was striving for peace and trying to find any way to avoid a conflict, and that it was all up to Saddam to choose peace or conflict. That deliberate misrepresentation, in what was said to Parliament, of what was being said to the Americans continued into the very onset of war itself.

I want to refer to the memo that my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) quoted earlier. When Blair was telling Parliament, even in his speech in the war-or-peace debate, that

“I have never put the justification for action as regime change”,—

[Official Report, 18 March 2003; Vol. 401, c. 772.]

he was telling George Bush only a few days later:

“That’s why, though Iraq’s WMD is the immediate justification for action, ridding Iraq of Saddam is the real prize.”

We heard earlier that this was not a matter of one man. But that one man was the Prime Minister. We were told earlier that it was really about process of government, but it was the Prime Minister who dictated the process of government and indeed prevented government processes, meaning that checks and balances did not work. Above all, it was the Prime Minister who prevented this House from having the information it required to make a reasonable judgment.

Last week, I heard that one of the defences of intervention in Iraq was a counterfactual argument: what if Saddam Hussein had stayed in power? What would he have done? For example, what damage would he have done during the Arab spring? I have had another counterfactual argument in mind: what if the massive international coalition that was built to deal with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan had been held together? What if the hundreds of billions of dollars that were then to be wasted in the Iraqi desert had been applied to making a real success of the rebuilding of Afghanistan? What if the justification for a totally legal international intervention, which this country took part in, had resulted in a genuine benefit? What if that massive coalition, which extended even to approval from the Palestine Liberation Organisation, had been able to demonstrate that a legal war, correctly applied, could result in construction, reconstruction and allowing a country the investment required to be a shining light of a genuine international intervention?

The United States of America was, in a way, never stronger than in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. It was never more respected, because it had suffered a terrorist atrocity. What would have happened if an ever broader coalition had brought to fruition the situation that I have described, instead of this meandering into Iraq on a private vendetta of the President of the United States with his closet of neo-con advisers, aided and abetted by a British Prime Minister who subverted collective responsibility and prevented this Parliament from having the information that it required to hold the Government to account?

detailed examples. For example, the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) referred to the total misrepresentation of the situation in the United Nations. How do we know that it was a misrepresentation? Because Chilcot has published what was being said within Government, and we can compare that directly with the explanation that Parliament was being offered. The process of Parliament being told one thing while George W. Bush was being assured of something else took place not over a few weeks but over 15 months—that is amply demonstrated in the evidence presented to Chilcot. We know now why Chilcot fought so strongly to have the private memos as part of the report.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe rightly pointed to the motivation of regime change and the difficulty that regime change could not make the war legal in generally understood international terms. That is amply demonstrated in a private memo from Tony Blair to George Bush in December 2001, which states that

“any link to 11 September and AQ”—

al-Qaeda—

“is at best very tenuous; and at present international opinion would be reluctant, outside the US/UK, to support immediate military action though, for sure, people want to be rid of Saddam.

So we need a strategy for regime change that builds over time.”

At the same time, however, when pursuing the Prime Minister in the House, Charles Kennedy was being told that the “two phases” of war included the war in Afghanistan and the pursuit of “international terrorism in all its different forms. That is a matter of investigating its financing, how terrorists move across frontiers”.—


The House was being told that stage 2 of the war on terror was not an assault on Iraq—far less regime change in Iraq—but the pursuit of international terrorism. The two things are totally incompatible. One thing was being said to George Bush in private and another thing was being said to this Parliament and the people of the country.

Moving into 2002, there was something that was amply picked up by the press after Chilcot reported—the memo of 28 July to George Bush, stating:

“I will be with you, whatever.”

I heard the former Prime Minister explain that to John Humphrys on the “Today” programme by saying that of “whatever” meant somehow “wherever”, and that the memo did not give an unconditional commitment to stand with the United States in a war. I am not sure I fully understood that explanation, and crucially, nor did John Chilcot or Jack Straw, a crucial member of the Administration.

Jack Straw’s memos to Tony Blair have also been published. The report shows that on 11 March 2003 Straw wrote to Blair:

“When Bush graciously accepted your offer to be with him all the way, he wanted you alive, not dead!”

That referred not to the mortal danger to troops or civilians that would ensue from a war, but to whether the then Prime Minister would be alive or dead politically. Jack Straw was under no illusions whatever about the commitment that had been given to George Bush. Nor were Tony Blair’s own advisers, who advised him to take it out of the memo, or George Bush and his advisers, or Secretary of State Colin Powell.
[Alex Salmond]

I once told the former Prime Minister that he would answer to a higher law than this Parliament, and I believe that to be absolutely true. In the meantime, this Parliament should hold him accountable at this stage, not because it is a matter of pursuing him but because it will demonstrate and illustrate that, even retrospectively, if a Parliament is systematically misled, it will say that up with it we shall not put. That is part of the changes that we should make not just in the processes of government, to impose collective responsibility, and not just in, I hope, learning the lessons of how to reconstruct a country, but, essentially, in parliamentary accountability.

If we make those changes, we will be able to say legitimately that an Iraq could never happen again.

4.1 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). There is no doubt that they have two very clear advantages over me in this debate, in that both of them opposed the motion in the House in 2003, which initiated our military action in Iraq. I, on the other hand, supported it—something that I have come very much to regret. I supported it at the time because I was persuaded by the arguments eloquently put forward by the Prime Minister, Mr Blair. He said that, in his view, Saddam Hussein was a real and present danger in the immediate context and that that justified taking military action against him, even without going back for a further resolution of the United Nations Security Council, but relying on the previous resolutions, which, as considerable evidence showed, had been serially breached by Saddam Hussein, certainly in his non-co-operation. On that basis, I voted for the motion, as did many others who are still Members and present in this House today.

Sir John Chilcot’s report highlights how the decision-making processes of government can become distorted under pressure of events. I should like to think that I am always a bit wary of that. The distortions highlighted in the report are so considerable that it highlights a dysfunctionality at the heart of Mr Blair’s Government that I hope may have been exceptional to him. For all that, there are plenty of cautionary tales for us in this House today that we can look at in the current context just as much as they would have been considered at the time.

This point seems to have been rather well made already that, and I will not repeat it, because Mr Blair had formed in his view a very strong resolution that we should support the United States, including in removing Saddam Hussein and effecting regime change, the entirety of the processes of government, and of Whitehall were then skewed in order to achieve that aim and had the mischief of disregarding all the evidence that might be available to contradict the belief that that was the right course of action to take—whether it was intelligence information or the thorny problem of legality, both of which I wish to touch on briefly this afternoon.

On the question of the intelligence, those of us who have been in government, or who have served on the National Security Council as I have—indeed it is also true of my current role as Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee—know perfectly well that intelligence, often obtained at great risk and which is with difficulty, can only be what it is, a tool in decision making. The intelligence may be mistaken. One cannot prevent that in a human society, and one cannot guarantee that its interpretation will be correct. My impression during my time in government was that the intelligence agencies and the Joint Intelligence Committee now go to very considerable lengths to point out the limits of the use to which intelligence can properly be put—a lesson which, I suspect, they derived from this experience.

Reading Sir John Chilcot’s report, one can only conclude that the way in which intelligence was handled during the run-up to the Iraq war is, in some cases, truly breathtaking. It makes very troublesome reading. I hope very much—I am not going to say anything more about this—that those within the agencies who now do the work will read and reread Sir John’s report in order to remind themselves of how perfectly reasonable intelligence was skewed and, I have to say, misused for the purposes of justifying a theory, and then, I am afraid, misused by Mr Blair when he came to address this House in the defining moment before the war was sanctioned by this Parliament.

The certainties that were engendered were never present. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) made a very good intervention about this last week when he said that if we had taken the time and trouble to read some of the background information available, we might have doubted some of the certainties that were being expressed. I think he was absolutely right about that, and that is another burden that Members of this House who participated in that debate will have to bear.

So much for the intelligence. What about the process of legal advice? I was at the heart of trying to provide legal advice to Government when I was a Law Officer. My hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General is on the Front Bench and he, too, has been involved in those processes. As Law Officers know, legal advice is often advice which cannot in any way be certain. Legal advice is exactly what it says it is. In some cases, particularly when one is dealing with international law, the question whether one is on the right side or the wrong side of international law is an intensely grey area, precisely because there is no ultimate tribunal to determine those issues. Yet at the heart of the British Government’s doctrine and ethics is the principle that we have to act lawfully at all times. It is for the Law Officers to try to steer that course.

What shines through to me, reading the Chilcot inquiry report, is not, as some critics have said, that Lord Goldsmith as Attorney General abandoned legal objectivity. Now that I have read the Chilcot inquiry report and looked at these passages very carefully, it seems to me that he fulfilled those criteria as best he possibly could, but that he was drawn into a process which in itself was utterly flawed, because it cherry-picked whatever bit of advice that he provided suited those who wanted to present it, and then sold it in that way both to the Cabinet, who never properly inquired or scrutinised it at all, and ultimately to the public.

Mr David Davis: Does my right hon. and learned Friend really think that the Attorney General met all his duties? The report refers to the final question to Tony Blair, which it says was answered perfunctorily,
about whether the conditions had been met. Surely he should have been a little more pressing, rather than accepting a perfunctory reply before changing his view.

Mr Grieve: I simply quote from paragraph 810 of the executive summary:

“It is an essential part of the legal basis for military action”—this was written by an official in the Attorney General’s Department—

“without a further resolution of the Security Council that there is strong evidence that Iraq has failed to comply with and co-operate fully in the implementation of resolution 1441 and has thus failed to take the final opportunity offered by the Security Council in that resolution. The Attorney General understands that it is unequivocally the Prime Minister’s view that Iraq has committed further material breaches as specified in [operative] paragraph 4 of resolution 1441, but as this is a judgment for the Prime Minister, the Attorney would be grateful for confirmation that this is the case.”

It is important to understand one of the big changes that has probably taken place between 2003 and today in the way in which a Law Officer’s advice is secured. My impression from reading Chilcot—I hope I have got this right—is that, in practice, the Attorney General was provided with only sketched backgrounds of the factual analysis on which his legal opinion was being sought. The big difference now, and I can tell the House this without giving away state secrets, is that if Law Officers are asked to advise on a factual basis that involves a serious or complex problem of international law, they will receive briefing that is as good as, and—if they demand it—potentially better than, that which would be provided to the Prime Minister himself as to the intelligence and factual base that justifies it, so they have to make their own independent assessment. However, it is quite clear that, in 2003, and, I suspect, even before then—I do not think this was peculiar to 2003—that was not the practice that was adopted; it was not how Government worked. In practice, the Law Officer, Lord Goldsmith, was placed in a position where he had, reasonably, to take on trust the factual assessments made by others, and particularly the Prime Minister.

I want to make it clear that I cannot make a judgment on whether Lord Goldsmith’s advice of 7 March was right or not, but he set out—correctly, in my view—the alternative interpretations available for resolution 1441. I simply make the point, as I did in my intervention, that there are areas of international law that raise massive difficulties of interpretation. If, for example, we stuck, as some jurists would argue, to the principle that no military intervention can take place without UN Security Council authorisation, the well-established United Kingdom doctrine of intervening on the basis of humanitarian necessity, which is what led us to be able to take action in Kosovo, would never have come about. I simply chuck that into the pool of the debate the complexities.

Of course, none of that gets away from the fact that the debate would likely have been very different in Cabinet if Lord Goldsmith’s advice in its original form had been properly presented, circulated and discussed. As any of us who have been in government know, the presentation of options by which we moderate each other’s opinions is by challenging them. If we do not have a process of challenge, we should not be surprised that, at the end of the day, people simply end up rubber-stamping decisions because it appears convenient to do so. One of the interesting features, I might add, of being in coalition was that one quickly realised that because some members of, for example, the National Security Council or the Cabinet were not beholden to the Prime Minister, the level of challenge was raised in a manner that one might not necessarily have found in a single-party Government, which is an interesting reflection on some of the problems that flow from it. Of course, when one has a Prime Minister who is utterly dominant after four or five years in government and receiving a triumphant second mandate, these things become even harder.

Those, then, are my thoughts on those two principal issues. There are lots of other issues in the report, which is one of the most compelling reads I have had. I am not sure I am going to be able to get through the whole lot, but I will certainly try to read much more of it.

Let me just make two final points. First, the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) expressed the desire that accountability should lead to somebody being held at least in contempt of this House if Mr Blair did act improperly. I simply say to him that, just as some people were talking about impeachment, which was last used in 1806, contempt proceedings in Parliament—unless they are based on findings made in an external tribunal that meets article 6 compliance—will, in practice, be very difficult. I would strongly argue that, tempting as such a route might suggest itself to be, the practical difficulties are likely to make it impossible to follow. I say that in all sincerity.

Joanna Cherry: I would like to explore this with the right hon. and learned Gentleman. I am not quite clear in what way he considers that the former Prime Minister’s civil rights and obligations would be determined in a contempt motion. As I understand it, as a novice in parliamentary procedure, it is a breach of privilege. It is not a determination of the former PM’s civil rights or obligations, and it is clearly not a criminal charge—a contempt of court. Could the right hon. and learned Gentleman elucidate on what basis he thinks that article 6 would be engaged?

Mr Grieve: It depends, I suppose, on what sanction this House wishes to follow. However, there is a second issue. We may have examples where somebody says one thing to this House and, in front of a tribunal or court of record, when giving evidence on oath, says something different. The House can then look at those two things juxtaposed and conclude, for example, that the House was misled in evidence that it was given. That might well give rise to a finding of breach of privilege for contempt, although that still leaves unanswered the question of sanctions.

I do understand the hon. and learned Lady’s point. However, I am not, in this case, making some definitive statement; I am simply describing what, to my mind, appear to be the difficulties that are likely to come from trying to pursue this particular course of action. As, on the whole, I would like the reputation of this House to stand enhanced by the way in which we approach the Chilcot inquiry report and its aftermath, I am always wary of suggesting, counselling or recommending a course of action that might lead to the very opposite of what is intended.
Joanna Cherry: The right hon. and learned Gentleman knows that I hold his legal expertise in the highest regard. He says that it is important that the reputation of this House is enhanced by the way in which it deals with the outcome of this report. Surely the reputation of this House will not be enhanced if there is no attempt to hold the former Prime Minister to account.

Mr Grieve: I have listened to the hon. and learned Lady, and this matter can be debated or discussed at greater length, but, as I say, I counsel caution. The truth is that the then Prime Minister, Mr Blair, has been examined at the court of public opinion and, I suspect, of history, and I think it is likely that that judgment is going to be pretty unkind to the way in which this process was carried out. Whether the House feels that it wants to do more immediately is a matter that we can debate another time.

The point has been made that the outcome of this process in the middle east has been, on the evidence, lamentable. Of course, the middle east is a place of massive dysfunctionality. It may be that even if we had not intervened in 2003, we would find that another pattern of war and bloody conflict would have occurred, based on a whole series of disintegrations of the social fabric of that area that has been going on for some time, and that we can see manifested in the current conflicts in Iraq and Syria. That is not, I think, entirely due to our intervention in 2003, but has elements inherent within those societies themselves. I worry very much—indeed, this has coloured my view as a politician ever since—that this has also had a terrible effect on public trust in us and our institutions in this country that carries itself all the way into the Brexit referendum and its aftermath. On that, I rather agreed, for once, with an article in the New Statesman.

We have much to learn from this very sorry episode. The nugget I derive from it is that we must have open debate and that we must avoid simply treating politics as presentational gimmicks. That has become a habit in modern western society because of the development of social media, the press and the way in which we communicate ideas, but if we continue to do it we will ruthlessly undermine sensible decision making and the ability to come to the right conclusions by debate, which is absolutely the heart of what this House should be about.

4.20 pm

Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab): I want to begin where the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), who has just spoken very eloquently, ended. I entirely agree that there is much to learn from the Chilcot report. One of the things that I am most concerned about—I know that it is very early to say this—is that it is far from clear to me that we are actually going to learn the things that we should.

On the morning of the publication of the Chilcot report, I listened to the radio and heard a number of commentators and, indeed, Members of this House, including, I think the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), saying one after another, “Of course, we all know what happened.” The script was simple and familiar: “Tony Blair knew there were no weapons of mass destruction. He deliberately lied to the House of Commons about whether there was intelligence to suggest that there were such weapons. He made a secret pact with George Bush long before the war, committing us to it in all circumstances, so everything that happened in between was irrelevant, and the war itself was illegal because there was no second United Nations resolution.”

It seems to me that this is the right moment to point out that this is, I think, the fifth inquiry into what happened in 2003 and before and after the invasion, and, as far as I recall, none of them has verified that incredibly simply script. Nor does it seem to me that the Chilcot report confirms it.

The inquiry team accepts, as have the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) and the former Attorney General, that when the Prime Minister told this House that he believed that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, he believed it implicitly to be true. He was not making up the intelligence or telling this House anything other than what he believed to be true, let alone inventing a lie, which seems to be being implied. Indeed, the report points out that the basic case that Saddam Hussein had retained weapons of mass destruction and that he had the intent to develop more, given the opportunity, was what the Joint Intelligence Committee itself believed.

It seems to me that one of the most important things that comes out of Chilcot—the former Attorney General touched on this—is the degree to which whole swathes of people whose professional judgment was involved were mistaken, and that continued to be the case right up to and, indeed, beyond the invasion. Chilcot makes it clear that that is what the Joint Intelligence Committee had continually reported both to the then Prime Minister and to the Cabinet. The report states:

“There is no evidence that intelligence was improperly included in the dossier or that No. 10 improperly influenced the text... The Inquiry is not questioning Mr Blair’s belief, which he consistently reiterated... or his legitimate role in advocating Government policy.”

It is really important to bear that in mind, especially as one listens to some of the detailed and very determined attempts to create a different impression.

Sir John Chilcot also pointed out that, along with the dangers that the intelligence community believed that Saddam Hussein presented, it believed that, “Saddam Hussein could not be removed without an invasion.” That was also thought to be relevant.

Of course, with the benefit of hindsight we all know that the intelligence community and the then Prime Minister were wrong, but we did not know it then. What is more, what our intelligence services believed was believed by almost every other intelligence service in the world, including the French and the Russians, and there is no doubt that that is why Security Council resolution 1441 was carried unanimously.

Mr David Davis: The right hon. Lady said that we did not know at the time. However, on 15 March 2002, the JIC said that the intelligence on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programmes was sporadic and patchy. Three weeks later, in Texas, Tony Blair said:

“We know he has been developing these weapons. We know that those weapons constitute a threat”.

How did we not know at the time, and how is that consistent?
Margaret Beckett: I am familiar with the insistence that, in some way, this is hugely important. That is not the impression that the public are being given or, if I may say so, that the right hon. Gentleman, among others, is striving every day to give them. The public are being given the impression, not that the intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction was sporadic and patchy but that it was there, but that the intelligence services and the then Prime Minister knew that there were no weapons of mass destruction and deliberately misled the House. That is not true and was never true. No attempt—

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the right hon. Member give way?

Margaret Beckett: No. No attempt to read that into the record can possibly be justified. We did not know it then—no one knew it then—and most people very firmly believed in Saddam Hussein's intentions.

The third allegation is about the secret commitment. I was not the slightest bit surprised to hear the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) quoting the single sentence that is included in the background notification. I agree with him entirely if his assertion is that it was a profound mistake for the former Prime Minister to use that phraseology. However, I do not read into it the sinister feeling that the right hon. Gentleman does, nor indeed did the Chilcot inquiry. To read into it the sinister feeling that the right hon. Gentleman, among others, is striving every day to give them. The public are being given the impression, not that the intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction was sporadic and patchy but that it was there, but that the intelligence services and the then Prime Minister knew that there were no weapons of mass destruction and deliberately misled the House. That is not true and was never true. No attempt—

Alex Salmond: The right hon. Lady will find, as she peruses the report, that Chilcot found it much more significant than that. That is why he said that it would make it very difficult for the UK to subsequently withdraw its support for the US. In a memo to Tony Blair, her colleague Jack Straw said:

"When Bush graciously accepted your offer to be with him all the way".

Can the right hon. Lady give us an explanation for that?

Margaret Beckett: It would be better to ask my former colleague. However, having been the recipient of Jack Straw's notes, I would suggest that he was ironically quoting back to the Prime Minister words he did not think the Prime Minister should have used; and he was right about that, as no doubt the right hon. Gentleman will agree.

Then there is the question of legality. It has been said here before, and no doubt will be said again, that Chilcot does not pronounce on the legality of the proceeding. He criticises the processes but he does not say that a second resolution was needed, although I accept that he does not go into that territory. There is an enormous amount of dispute about this matter, and the former Attorney General touched on it a moment ago. It has led to the query, which he raised, as to why there were so few questions from the Cabinet to the Attorney General when he gave us his advice.

One of the things I am pretty sure I have said before, but I do not suppose anybody has paid any attention and they probably will not now, is that it is quite simply the case that the issue of whether we needed a second resolution had been gone over ad nauseam. It had been discussed at length. The Cabinet had had extensive verbal reports from the then Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister about the progress of discussions in the Security Council, about the desire to have a second resolution, about how things were going, who was objecting, and the detail of how that process of negotiation was taking place.

The views of the then Foreign Office legal adviser in London have been much quoted. Evidence was given to the Chilcot inquiry about that, and it is absolutely right and wholly understandable that all the focus has been on the advice of the Foreign Office legal people in London. Although I was interested in the remarks of the Former Attorney General about how unclear international law is and how interpreting it is not always an easy matter, that is certainly not the impression that the public have been given.

However, I have rarely seen any reference made to the fact that someone else gave evidence to the inquiry about the legality of resolution 1441 and whether a second resolution was required. That person was the head of the Foreign Office legal team at the United Nations—the team whose day-to-day dealings are with the Security Council; the team who advised the then Government, and who presumably advise equivalent people in the Government today, on the handling of negotiations; and who give the Government legal advice about the detail of what resolutions mean—what their import will be.

That legal adviser confirmed what the former Foreign Secretary had consistently told the Cabinet, day after day—that the Russians and the French, in particular, had tried to get an explicit reference into resolution 1441 to the need for a second resolution before any military action could be undertaken, even though resolution 1441, as drafted, stated that it was a “final opportunity” to comply with UN resolutions and talked about “serious consequences” if Saddam did not comply. The legal adviser told the Chilcot inquiry that those discussions in the Security Council were exhaustive; that a very strong attempt was made to insist that a second resolution was carried; but that, in the end, the Russians and the French accepted that a second resolution was not referred to, and the resolution was carried unanimously—including, if I recall correctly, with the vote of the Syrian Government, which is a remarkable thought in today's circumstances.

The accusation has also been made in all these discussions that the attempt to get Saddam Hussein to conform with UN resolutions was in some way false—that there was no wish for Saddam Hussein to conform, and that the intention from the beginning was military action. As I said in an intervention on the Foreign Secretary, the then Prime Minister repeatedly warned the Cabinet that if Saddam Hussein did, indeed, choose to comply with the UN resolutions, he stayed; and he reminded us that that would be an outcome that many—not least the many in this House who campaigned on behalf of the
Kurds—would deplore and regret. It was repeatedly pointed out to us, “If Saddam complies, there will be no military action. He stays in power.”

Caroline Lucas: I thank the right hon. Lady for so graciously giving way. The Chilcot report contains a quote from Sir Richard Dearlove, the head of MI6 at the time, telling Tony Blair that the US was deliberately setting the bar “so high that Saddam Hussein would be unable to comply”. So the idea that when Tony Blair was standing in the House of Commons on the day of the vote, there was still time for Saddam to comply, is simply wrong. Tony Blair has already been told by Sir Richard Dearlove that the bar has been set deliberately high for the weapons inspectors, so that Saddam cannot comply.

Margaret Beckett: I know about the quote from Sir Richard Dearlove and I know that he expressed that view, as I recall, quite some time before, because I do not think he was in post at the time we are speaking of. I accept that it was serious and difficult, but if Saddam had shown any intention of complying or made any move to readmit inspectors—for example, a series of tests was proposed that Saddam could meet to show whether he was complying, but all that was rejected—by the French, by the way, and also by Saddam. So that is where we are. There was, indeed, a warning that if Saddam complied, military action would not occur.

That is the original four-point series of accusations. To that story, three further accusations have now been added. The first, from the Chilcot report, is that action was taken when it was not a matter of the last resort. The second is that we could have held back longer and the whole matter could have been addressed by further inspections. The third was that the events that have since taken place in the middle east are all a result of the Iraq invasion, and that that too should lie on the consciences of all of us who voted for it.

The point about whether the intervention was a last resort was also raised by my late right hon. Friend Richard Dearlove and I know that he expressed that view, as I recall, quite some time before, because I do not think he was in post at the time we are speaking of. I accept that it was serious and difficult, but if Saddam had shown any intention of complying or made any move to readmit inspectors—for example, a series of tests was proposed that Saddam could meet to show whether he was complying, but all that was rejected—by the French, by the way, and also by Saddam. So that is where we are. There was, indeed, a warning that if Saddam complied, military action would not occur.

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The point about whether the intervention was a last resort was also raised by my late right hon. Friend Robin Cook, and those who make that case rest their argument on the continued effectiveness of containment backed by sanctions. What nobody seems to mention any more is that at that time, it was widely and seriously believed that containment was weakening and ceasing to be effective. Anyone who was around can cast their mind back and recall that there was an enormous and growing campaign against the sanctions that were helping to keep in place the hoped-for containment. Many right hon. and hon. Members will recall the protests that took place continually, across the road in Parliament Square, but nearly everybody has forgotten that that was not at first a protest against the war; it was a protest against the maintenance of sanctions against Saddam Hussein. To be fair to those who undertook that protest, it was done on a perfectly legitimate and understandable basis, because Saddam was stealing money that was being given to feed the Iraqi people and using it for his own purposes, and consequently there was growing poverty and hardship in Iraq. It was understandable that people should have been against sanctions on that basis, and they were, and the campaign against those sanctions was growing.

Dr Andrew Murray (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does the right hon. Lady fully understand the significance of chapter 20 in the executive summary, which states clearly that this action was not a last resort? That is important because it is fundamental to the definition of a just war. If we accept Chilcot’s assertion, its corollary is that this was not a just war, with all the consequences that follow from that. In all these volumes of stuff, that simple sentence in the executive summary bangs the whole lot to rights.

Margaret Beckett: I realised that that was what it meant. I was under the impression—I may be mistaken; unlike many others here, I am not a lawyer—that a just war was a religious rather than a military or legal concept, although I do understand it in those terms. Apart from the question of whether the war was just because it was not a last resort, on containment, evidence was found after the invasion that Saddam Hussein had been further in breach of UN resolutions than we understood at the time. Robin Cook was unaware of that when he made his statement in this House, and the impression was created that containment was working—for example, missile development had been forbidden, but people were not aware that, as the Butler report stated, Iraq was developing ballistic missiles with a longer range than permitted under the relevant Security Council resolutions. Saddam Hussein clearly intended to reconstitute long-range delivery systems that were potentially for use with weapons of mass destruction. As we discovered after the invasion, it was not a simple matter of containment working and there being no breaches, or that Saddam Hussein was not trying to develop weapons.

There is also the argument that we could have held on, and I must accept Chilcot’s verdict that such action was not impossible. However, no one now touches on the circumstances in which people found themselves by then. We had troops in theatre in difficult, unpleasant, and incredibly dangerous circumstances. Indeed, those troops were expecting hourly, daily, the potential attacks involving chemical or biological weapons that everyone believed Saddam Hussein possessed, and that one hoped our troops were equipped to resist. So it was not a simple matter of saying there was no need.

If you are going to take action, you have to start military preparations. By that point, military preparations had advanced to such an extent that our troops were in theatre. Ultimately, one could argue—that doubt people will—that those troops could have been withdrawn, but what kind of signal would that have sent to Saddam Hussein or to the rest of the world? It seems to me that it would have given Saddam Hussein the signal that he was perfectly free to resume the kind of operations he had undertaken in the past, whether against the Kurds or Iran. These issues are not as simple as is sometimes assumed. I completely accept, however, the argument made in Chilcot that one of the lessons we should learn is that we should be wary of letting military concerns drive political decisions. That brings me back to my principal thesis, which is that there is much in Chilcot from which we can learn, but only if we do not divert ourselves on to things that Chilcot does not say.

The final issue or accusation I wish to address is that everything that has happened in Iraq, Syria and across the middle east since has all flowed from the invasion of Iraq, that it is all down to a dreadful miscalculation.
The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) called it the worst foreign policy mistake. Let us say that it was. I do not myself quite take that view, but let us accept his premise. But I do not think he argues, and I certainly do not for one second accept, that everything terrible that is happening now or has happened since in the middle east is as a result of that invasion.

It is grossly irresponsible, in order for people to satisfy the clear, very real anger and passion they feel against the then Government, the then Prime Minister and the current civil war in Iraq, to say to the evil men of ISIL, Daesh and al-Qaeda that they are off the hook for the blame for any of the terrible things they do because it is all down to our fault. [Interruption.] It is no good people making noises off, because we all know that that is exactly the kind of assertion that very many people make: that all of this stuff is down to the mistakes of the west; it is all down to the evildoing of the west and everyone else is absolved.

No one should be absolved from responsibility for the things they themselves advocate or they themselves do. I do not seek to resile from the responsibility that I exercised when I voted in Cabinet and I voted in this House for the Iraq war. I regret bitterly the events that have occurred since, as any sensible person would, but I do not pretend that the decision I made was not my decision and that it was somehow all somebody else’s fault.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry to have to announce this to the House, but on account of the number of would-be contributors there will now be a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches with immediate effect. That limit may have to be reviewed, but it is 10 minutes for now. I call Mr David Davis.

4.43 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett), although I felt that at the end she destroyed her own argument by attributing to other people views that nobody holds: that somehow IS is allowed off the hook of blame because of the weaknesses and failures of the British Government.

Let us be clear what those failures are: 150,000 deaths by violence, a large majority of them innocent civilians; over 1 million deaths, on medical estimates, as a result of this war; and a destroyed country. Iraq was a nasty dictatorship, but containment—sanctions, inspections when they were allowed, and no-fly zones—was broadly working. There was damage to the stability of the middle east. Of course it is not the entire story, but let us not forget that IS started in an American prisoner-of-war camp in Iraq. That is where its high command comes from, so let us not put that to one side either. There has been a significantly increased terrorist threat worldwide, something that was known and warned about before we took this action. That is what we are talking about. That is what the worst foreign policy mistake in our modern history means for many, many innocent people in the world.

In the 1990s, before that happened, I had responsibility for counter-proliferation in the Conservative Government of the time. I accept that the behaviour of the Saddam Hussein regime was peculiar to say the least. As far as we could tell from inspections and our intelligence, it did not have WMD or a workable WMD programme but was deliberately trying to create confusion about that, by not co-operating from time to time, by moving trucks from one site to another before inspectors arrived, and so on. It was probably doing that to keep Iran convinced that it had a WMD programme. That was what it was worried about—not us, but its next-door neighbour against which it had fought a massive war shortly before. That explains some of the strange behaviour of the regime.

At that time and—I guess—up until just before 2001, the general belief was that this was a moderate and controllable threat. Indeed, Carne Ross, the middle east specialist among our delegation to the UN, said that when he first took the job he was briefed:

“Basically we don’t think there’s anything there. We are justifying sanctions on the basis that Iraq has not answered questions about its past stocks”.

Since then, all the JIC, SIS and GCHQ reports have corroborated that. It was considered a moderate and controllable threat at that point.

Then what happened? We had 9/11, which, quite properly, shocked the world: 3,000 deaths in a hideous terrorist spectacular. Of course, Tony Blair justifies his actions on that basis, but I have to say to him that this was a reason for getting it right, not an excuse for getting it wrong. There was understandable paranoia that something like it might happen again, either here or somewhere else, but then there came a dangerous and simplistic conflation of the real, present and continuing threat from al-Qaeda and Iraq—the axis of evil nonsense that President Bush generated at the time. This fiction was reinforced in February 2002, when the Americans rendered to Egypt somebody called Sheikh al-Libi, who was tortured on the question of whether there was a chemical and biological weapons relationship between Iraq and al-Qaeda. Essentially, he was tortured until he said yes, and that was the evidence that Colin Powell cited at the United Nations—the House might remember—when he talked about having “substantial evidence”. Of course, it was a fiction obtained under torture.

I am quite sure that that intelligence was shared with Mr Blair, who, not knowing the source, would have found it persuasive, as something told to the Americans by an al-Qaeda commander. It seems from the Chilcot report that, at some point between December 2001 and possibly March 2002 but certainly by July 2002, Mr Blair effectively signed Britain up to the American military effort. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said, the issue was not our soldiers but our reputation. It was our involvement that legitimised the American action.

This, however, produced a problem for our Prime Minister. Under American law, to go to war on the basis of regime change is entirely legal. They do not recognise the international laws that render it otherwise, so for them regime change is a perfectly legitimate casus belli. From comments made and the items to which the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) referred, it seems that Tony Blair agreed, but he had a problem, because our law and international law did not allow it. He therefore saw his role as building a coalition to support the Americans.
[Mr David Davis]

There was nothing dishonourable in that, if Tony Blair believed the aim, but to do it he had to achieve a number of things. He had to create a casus belli under international law, and for that he needed proof of weapons of mass destruction and of a terrorist threat, and a UN resolution and thereby proof of legality. The result was UN resolution 1441, the thrust of which was that it was the final opportunity for Iraq to comply with its disarmament obligations. The vote was 15:0 in favour. As the right hon. Member for Derby South said, it did not include a deliberate trigger to war; it required a further resolution. The UN inspectorate went in and did 700 inspections of over 300 sites. Interestingly, it went to three dozen sites given to it by the CIA and MI6, who thought that was where the weapons were located. The inspectorate found not a thing—over three and a half months, it found nothing whatsoever.

Then the American President set a timetable, creating a real problem over and above the United Nations—war by March. That is why Chilcot said that going to war was not the last resort. It was not. It gave Mr Blair a problem. What should he do? Many other countries, including France and Russia, viewed the inspection process as incomplete—and, of course, it was. The UN vote was then lost by 11 to four, so when Blair returned to the UK, he had to win a debate and vote in the House of Commons. He made what some people think was the greatest speech of his life, but in order to persuade us, he had to say five things that were a clear misrepresentation.

Mr Blair accused France of saying that it would never vote for war. That was simply not true, and he knew it was not true. I refer to an interview given on Radio 4 in the last year by Sir Stephen Wall. As a Foreign Office adviser in No. 10, he was privy to what was going on and clarified what was really said, which was that, effectively, “As of now, France will vote against”. When he was asked whether Downing Street deliberately lied about Chirac’s statement, he said yes, it deliberately lied.

The next two misrepresentations were quotations from the UN inspectors’ reports. Time is short, so let me read briefly what was said by Hans Blix, the head of the inspectorate. Speaking of the British Government, he said:

“If they had gone to the British Parliament in 2003 and said that we have a lot of things unaccounted for here, and we suspect there may be something, and we think it is safer to invade them, would the British Parliament have dreamt of saying yes to such a thing? I don’t think so. I think in order to go ahead they needed to make the allegations which they made and which were not sustainable…In substance yes they misrepresented what we did and they did so in order to get the authorisation they shouldn’t have had.”

That was Hans Blix’s view of what Tony Blair did in the House of Commons. Mr Blair also misrepresented what Hussein Kamel, Saddam Hussein’s son-in-law, had told the allies about the WMD programme.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Davis: I do not have time. Oh, I will give way.

Mr Clarke: I had it in mind that my right hon. Friend would get a bit more time.

Does my right hon. Friend think, with hindsight, that given that Hans Blix was perfectly willing to carry on with inspections, if the Americans could have been persuaded to delay for another month, all this could have been avoided? The Americans dismissed Blix, however, and regarded him as a waste of time; they were trying to get him out of the way.

Mr Davis: That is exactly right. That should have been the stance that Mr Blair took, but he did not. He chose instead to come to Parliament to misrepresent the case.

Mr Blair also misrepresented the line put forward by Mr Hussein Kamel, who was later killed by Saddam Hussein, to claim that the WMD programme was continuing. What was, in fact, said in an interview with the inspectorate, was that the WMD had all been destroyed by 1991.

Finally, Mr Blair was asked by Tam Dalyell about the risks of terrorism arising from the war, but the Prime Minister did not give him an answer—despite having been told by the JIC and by MI5 that it would increase both the international and domestic risk of terrorism and would destabilise the states in the area.

On five counts, then, Mr Blair misrepresented to this House the substantive aspects of the argument for the war. If this House is to contribute to decisions on war in the future, it must be able to rely on being told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth by our Prime Minister.

4.54 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): For those of us who took that fateful decision on 18 March 2003, the Chilcot report makes difficult and uncomfortable reading. Our thoughts today should, above all, be with the families, Iraqi and British, who lost loved ones in the conflict; but Members who voted for war—and I was one—did so in good faith.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett); I do not think that we were misled or lied to. Nor, more importantly, does the Chilcot report reach such a conclusion. However, we must all take our full share of the responsibility for that decision. As we now know, the intelligence was wrong, although, as my right hon. Friend said, many countries and many people—including Iraq’s neighbours, some of its own military, and the United Nations—thought that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. Had we known the truth at the time, the House would never have voted for war, and nor would I. For that we should apologise, and I certainly do, but at the time we could decide only on the basis of what we thought we knew. Let me also say this, however. If I am asked whether I regret the fact that Saddam Hussein is no longer in power, my reply is “No, I do not”, because he was a brutal dictator who had killed hundreds of thousands of his own citizens, and had used chemical weapons against them.

I want to reflect, very briefly, on three issues: the task of reconstruction that we faced, why Iraq was as it was, and some of the wider lessons. The problem faced by the Department for International Development in Basra
and the surrounding provinces in 2003 was not the humanitarian crisis that we had anticipated, but a different set of circumstances altogether. There was the dysfunctional nature of the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance. There were the problems of the coalition provisional authority, caused by a failure to plan. There was the legacy of Saddam’s dictatorship—when we tried to persuade the authorities in the south to talk to Baghdad, that was the last thing that they wanted to do, because they remembered what dealing with Baghdad had been like in the past. There was the legacy of the repression of the Shi’a, there was the malign neglect of infrastructure, and there was the absence of the United Nations, which no one has mentioned so far this afternoon. The bomb that killed Sérgio Vieira de Mello and 23 of his staff in August 2003 in the Canal Hotel was, in truth, the beginning of an insurgency that grew stronger with each passing month.

The problem facing reconstruction was not money. The Chilcot report itself concludes:

“There are no indications that DFID’s activities in Iraq were constrained by a lack of resources.”

Iraq was, and is still, a middle-income country with oil. In fact, the problem was spending money, including money from the World Bank, because of rapidly deteriorating security. No sooner did we manage to fix something—we made a real contribution to improving the water and electricity supply in the south of the country—than people would try to blow it up.

I want to place on record my thanks for the huge contribution that was made by many courageous individuals with whom I had the privilege of working—people from DFID and other Departments, British and Iraqi, military and civilian, non-governmental organisation staff and humanitarian staff—who tried to help the people of Iraq in the most difficult and dangerous circumstances. They all acted in the best traditions of public service, and we should thank them for what they did.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Julian Brazier): I endorse 100% the thanks and the tribute that the right hon. Gentleman has just paid to DFID officials, but he has passed rather rapidly over the subsequent months during which there appeared to be no planning for reconstruction at all.

Hilary Benn: I freely acknowledge that one of the failures, which is set out clearly in the report, was the failure to plan in advance of the decision taken on 18 March 2003. Indeed, there are lessons that we must learn from that. The truth is, however, that Iraq was a suppressed, repressed and brutalised society in which Saddam was the lid on the pressure cooker, and when he left, the lid came off. We have seen that in other countries, too—Libya has already been mentioned.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South rightly said that those who seek to blame the decision to invade for all the subsequent events miss the responsibility that others have for what has gone on. We must take our share of the responsibility, and disbanding the Iraqi army—which meant that thousands of men had no salary and no income, but had a gun and a grievance—was a profound mistake. But Iraqi politicians also have to bear a responsibility for the sectarian policies they have pursued, and those who still engage in suicide bombing cannot turn to us and say, “Look what you made me do”. They must bear responsibility for what they themselves have chosen to do to their fellow citizens.

The best evidence for the difference that good politics and good governance can make in Iraq is shown by the Kurdish region, which, let us not forget, was as it was partly because of the support we had given it through the no-fly zone. As a result, it is now the most stable and relatively prosperous part of Iraq. I pay tribute, as others have, to the peshmerga for the role that they have played, and still play, in trying to defeat Daesh.

The Kurds regard the 2003 invasion as a liberation. Karwan Jamal Tahir, the Kurdistan Regional Government representative to the UK, wrote this week about the Chilcot report that “there was an Iraq before the 2003 invasion, an Iraq that, for millions, was a concentration camp on the surface and a mass grave beneath.”

We only have to read the reports of Human Rights Watch to see what it had to say at the time about the mass executions, the mass disappearances, the use of chemical weapons, the suppression of the Shi’a majority, particularly after the 1991 uprising, and the attempt by Saddam to eradicate the population and culture of the Marsh Arabs, who had resided continuously in the marshlands for more than 5,000 years. That was what life was like, and we should not forget it.

At least today Iraq has a fragile democracy, and whatever our views on the decision 13 years ago, we have a continuing responsibility to assist, especially when the democratically elected Government ask for our help. That is why this House was right in 2014 to provide support in helping them defeat Daesh, and we have seen the benefit of that support in the progress made in the months since. We have also discovered more about what Daesh does as towns have been liberated.

That is why this House was right to vote unanimously to describe what is being done to the Yazidis, Christians, and other religious minorities in Iraq and Syria as “genocide at the hands of Daesh.”

I wish the Government would do what the House asked and take that to the UN Security Council so that it can be passed on to the International Criminal Court.

Finally, I turn to the wider lessons. For too long in foreign affairs, Governments have argued, “Better the strong man we know than the chaos we fear”, even when that strong man is a brutal murdering dictator. Yet look at what happens when the strong man falls in Libya, in Egypt and, indeed, in Iraq.

Three years after the end of the second world war, the UN General Assembly adopted and proclaimed the universal declaration of human rights. Article 3 states:

“Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

Article 28 states:

“Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realised.”

Yet for millions of people in the world those rights, so nobly expressed, have remained just words on paper, and they were certainly just words on paper during Saddam’s rule. Surely that will not do. Having created the UN, why do we not have the responsibility to ensure that the principles of the universal declaration of human rights are given universal expression internationally, exactly as we have managed to achieve, for example, in
our own country over many years? It is the responsibility of the UN Security Council to do that. That was why we created the UN, which has a moral responsibility and a legitimacy to act, and it is why I am a strong supporter of the Responsibility to Protect. That principle says that state sovereignty is not absolute and the international community has a responsibility to act in certain circumstances.

Finally, even though this is unspoken in the report, I think Chilcot forces us to consider that while there are consequences to taking action—we meet here today to discuss them and their legacy—there are also always consequences of not doing so. For me, that is the most important lesson of Iraq, both before and after 2003.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: I am going to bring my remarks to a conclusion, because so many others wish to speak.

As a world, we have a responsibility to be much more effective and determined in dealing with countries and conflicts in circumstances such as these before they turn into brutal and bloody civil wars. I believe that the best way to do that is to demonstrate that multilateralism—countries working together—can provide the answer to the uncomfortable question: what is to be done? The more we do that, the stronger will be our argument against those who would act unilaterally—at times we have to act unilaterally, and we were right to do so in Kosovo and in Sierra Leone—that there is another, better way. For that to happen, however, the United Nations has to do the job for which it was created.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am trying to accommodate as many colleagues as possible, and after the next speaker it will be necessary to reduce the time limit to six minutes. I am sorry, but this is inevitable.

5.5 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is a pleasure, as always, to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), whom I used to follow regularly when we were both on our respective parties’ Front Benches.

The aim of this debate on Chilcot should be to heal wounds and learn lessons, but I very much fear that it will be characterised by a discussion of whether Mr Blair is guilty or very guilty. Such a discussion would betray the interests of all those whose loved ones were placed in harm’s way and who paid the ultimate price in Iraq, as well as of the many thousands of Iraqis who lost their lives. It is the whole system of governance that we need to hold to account, not just the Prime Minister, if we are to achieve resolution and benefit.

In 2003, I sat over there on the Opposition Benches and heard what the Prime Minister said. I supported his judgment. That judgment could not have been reached and acted on by the Prime Minister without the active support, or at least the passive acquiescence, of the machinery of government. Before we come to the lessons for the future, however, let me observe that the central allegations boil down to two. The first is that the intelligence was wrong. The second is that a culture of sofa government—a lack of accountable structures for decision making—and inadequate procedures prevailed.

Having used the product of the three intelligence agencies while I was on the National Security Council and in Cabinet, I yield to no one in my admiration and respect for those who carry out what is often difficult and dangerous work. There are people working at GCHQ who could deploy their talents in the commercial world for 10 times what they are paid by the taxpayer, yet they choose to serve their country instead. We should honour and respect them for that. I have no hesitation in saying, from my own experience, that if those who work in the intelligence agencies were asked to do something improper by their political masters, they would simply refuse to do it. Intelligence is, by its very nature, difficult to hold to account. The normal rules of transparency and openness simply do not apply. The sourcing of intelligence is by definition complex and we cannot talk about it in any detail. In one instance, while I was Secretary of State for International Development, intelligence that we received on a particular situation in Africa turned out to be wrong, but the fault for the error did not lie with Britain or British intelligence.

On the issue of sofa government and informality, it is clear that there was a lack of Cabinet structure and accountability, as well as a quite extraordinary informality and, let us say, flexibility in the use of the Attorney General and his legal opinions. However, critical lessons have been learned and, crucially, they have resulted in the setting up of the National Security Council.

Neil Gray: My brother served in both Gulf wars. The right hon. Gentleman has talked about sofa government and the lessons to be learned from poor Government structures. Pages 121 and 122 of the executive summary give details of the delay in allowing the military to prepare and of the resulting lack of equipment and preparedness for our armed forces going into Iraq. Does he believe, as I and others do, that that unnecessarily cost some members of our armed forces their lives?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman makes a point about the absolute importance of having proper accountable structures, not informal machineries of government, as I was saying.

Moving on to the Libya campaign, there was a proper process by which legal advice was given to the Cabinet. Britain’s humanitarian responsibilities in the conflict were made clear at the first Cabinet meeting that authorised military action. The National Security Council met on numerous occasions, as did an inner, sub-committee of the NSC on which I sat. In addition to the conduct of the campaign, we discussed the humanitarian situation and the preparations for stabilisation on a daily basis. There was of course no invasion as such, but the Defence Secretary took personal responsibility for targeting to ensure that collateral damage was minimised, and the loss of civilian life was mercifully extremely limited.

On discharging our humanitarian responsibility, lessons were carefully learned and, as the Foreign Secretary emphasised, Britain did a good job indeed. We organised the planes and ships that successfully transported thousands of migrant workers home or to places of safety as far afield as the Philippines and Baghdad to remove them from harm’s way. The evacuation of 5,000 migrants
from the quayside at Misrata was a feat greatly assisted by Britain and for which the international community deserves the highest praise. When Tripoli was in danger of running out of water, it was DFID and the United Nations that successfully implemented our plan to prevent an emergency. The provision of food and medicines to conflict areas of Libya without either was also successfully accomplished.

My point is that specific lessons from the failures in Iraq were understood and implemented in respect of our humanitarian responsibilities. However, it is post-conflict stabilisation that attracts strong criticism regarding Iraq and Libya, where it is clear today that stabilisation is currently a failure. I want to make it clear that lessons were learned and that our focus on post-conflict stabilisation was absolute immediately after military action started. Britain set up an international stabilisation unit and worked closely with the UN, which was to have lead responsibility for stabilisation when the conflict ended. Britain supplied expertise, officials and funding, drawing on the lessons of Iraq. During the war, we gave technical support to the central bank and to such organs of the state that existed. Indeed, in contrast with Iraq, where the police and security services were simply abolished, we took specific significant steps to ensure that the police in Libya, who had not been engaged in human rights abuses, could be reassured by text message, for example, that they still had a job and should report for duty when the fighting diminished.

We prepared extensively, particularly through the support that we gave to UN institutions, to help stabilise Libya’s future, but we faced the simple problem that there was no peace to stabilise when the war was over and that in a country with limited structures outside the Gaddafi family the different factions were fractured and splintered. You can make all the plans you like for post-conflict stabilisation, but if there is no peace to stabilise, the international community’s non-military options are severely limited.

Lessons learned from Iraq and then applied in Libya have continued in respect of the British efforts in Syria. We have already made a huge funding commitment to stabilise the country when peace finally comes. We have played a more comprehensive role in humanitarian relief in and around Syria than the whole of the rest of the European Union put together. We were also the first country to put significant sums of taxpayers’ money into the Zaatari refugee camp in 2012, because we understood the approaching calamity.

The lessons we learn from the Chilcot report will shape our understanding of our place in the world. Will we continue to support the cause of liberal interventionism, as we successfully did in Sierra Leone and Kosovo, or will the House turn its back on discretionary intervention, even under UN auspices, and be prepared to stand idly by if—God forbid—another Rwandan genocide takes place? The post-Chilcot era will, I hope, see the right voices have been silenced and Charles Kennedy is vindicated. It is a tragedy that he is not here to experience that vindication, and it is equally a tragedy that neither is Robin Cook. Chilcot’s conclusion is exactly what so many of us have known for more than 13 years: there was no legal or strategic case for the invasion of Iraq; it was “unnecessary”; and military action was “not a last resort”. Instead of improving our security, it in fact made our country, their country and the world we share less safe.

In the case of Iraq, Mr Blair appeared to be more concerned with supporting American President George Bush than he was in pursing British interests and the interests of the Iraqi people. The most infamous quote—“I will be with you, whatever”—was not written to the Iraqi people, suffering under the undeniably cruel regime of such a brutal dictator, nor was it written to the British public as a clear display of the priorities of our elected leader. Instead, it was written to a neo-conservative US President intent on proving American superiority by waging war against an abstract noun. This was a President who was failing to make dramatic advances in Afghanistan, so instead he settled his sights on Iraq, despite the fact that, as Chilcot stresses on a number of occasions, the overall threat from Iraq was viewed as less serious than those from other countries of concern—Iran, Libya and North Korea.

Mr Blair was clearly determined to follow the US into war, no matter the consequences, and he effectively committed us to the Americans, no matter the evidence. We had, we have and I hope we will continue to have an intimate and rewarding relationship with the US, but we cannot allow our foreign policy to be defined by that relationship alone; “my ally right or wrong” is not a sustainable independent foreign policy. The strength of that unwavering commitment gave rise to the error of making the evidence fit the judgment, rather than the judgment fit the evidence. Nowhere is that clearer than when it came to the legal basis of war.

The Attorney General’s final view was little more than lukewarm, being that this was, “on balance, the better view”.

I believe that if we are to commit thousands of our young men and women to circumstances where their lives will be put at risk, we need something a little bit better and more certain than “on balance”. Going forward, we must ensure that there is no ambiguity in the legal advice provided to the Government or Parliament on matters of military action.

We must also be clear on what the end goal or exit plan is for any intervention. Despite its being clear very quickly that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the UK found itself assuming leadership of a military area of responsibility. Not only that, but it is
evident that, despite being a joint occupying power, the UK had little or no influence on the overall strategy of the Americans, leaving us blindly following their flawed lead. The US strategy included the policy of de-Ba’thification, which collapsed the Iraqi state and disbanded the army, creating a disgruntled and angry group of well-trained military leaders, many of whom went on to fight the occupation and, ultimately, to form Daesh. That appalling error directly contributed to the following six years of chaotic destruction, which saw so many of our armed forces put on the frontline without a proper strategy.

I hope that the Iraq inquiry—the Chilcot inquiry—will bring some comfort to the families of the 179 servicemen and women killed in Iraq, but there can be no justification for their being deployed to fight on a battlefield for which the proper preparation was not done. There is no doubt that the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 have directly contributed to the threats that the world now faces from Daesh and instability in the middle east.

As I stood shoulder to shoulder with Iraqis at the vigil held in London last week to remember the lives of those lost in the most recent attacks in Baghdad, it was clear to me what legacy has been left. Just last week, more than 300 people died in suicide attacks in Baghdad on top of the tragedies that we have seen in Istanbul, Paris and elsewhere. Terrorists are responsible for those horrific events, but the Iraq war is responsible for creating the vacuum in which terrorism and Daesh were formed, and through which anti-western sentiment has thrived, and that has happened despite our being advised at the time that that was a risk.

Liberal Democrats are outward-facing internationalists. We believe that Britain should engage in the world, not turn its back on it, and that our country has a strong role to play in promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law across the globe. Sometimes—rarely—that will mean taking military action, but the Iraq war has tarnished our reputation, ignored international law and undermined international institutions such as the United Nations, which we worked so hard at building in the aftermath of two world wars. It destroyed public confidence in our leaders and in Parliament, and it made it infinitely more difficult for a Government to make the case for war by making the prospect of humanitarian intervention all the more unpalatable to many.

5.21 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): On 18 March 2003, Mr Blair told the House of Commons that he judged the possibility of terrorist groups in possession of weapons of mass destruction as, “a real and present danger to Britain and its national security.”—[Official Report, 18 March 2003; Vol. 401, c. 768.] When Sir John Chilcot presented his report to the families of some of those killed in the Iraq war—those families included the parents of Lieutenant Marc Lawrence, a young naval aviator and one of my constituents, who was killed in a Sea King helicopter—he was rather more robust than he was in the conclusions of the report. He said:

“The judgements about the severity of the threat posed by Iraq’s WMDs were presented with a certainty that was not justified.”

On the eve of the vote on the Iraq war, a number of us on the Opposition Benches had grave concerns about what we were about to undertake and what we were going to ask of our young men and women in our armed services. We were called into an office by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who was then Leader of the Opposition, and by the shadow Foreign Minister, then the Member for Devizes, Michael Ancram. We were told by my right hon. Friend that he had been informed, on Privy Council terms, that there were weapons of mass destruction, that the United Kingdom, or the interests of the United Kingdom, faced a 45-minute threat from those weapons, and that it was imperative, in the interests of our national security, that we should support the motion that was to be put before the House. I think I am right in saying that, on that basis, all but one of us concurred.

I do not doubt the information that was given to me by my right hon. Friend. Friend, but I believe that he was misled on Privy Council terms. The House has heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) of the five items on which Mr Blair misled the House. Yes, we do have to learn from this. I must take responsibility, because I voted that way, for the death of my young constituent and, by implication, for the deaths of hundreds of armed personnel and many, many civilians.

Mr Speaker, if a motion for contempt is brought before you, you should look favourably on a hearing for it, because I believe that we owe that to the families of those who have lost their loved ones in this conflict.

5.24 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale). I echo the comments made by the Foreign Secretary when he opened this debate—indeed, others have made them since—about the heavy price that has been paid by those who lost their lives or who were seriously injured, and all of their families who have suffered the consequences.

As somebody who was a Member of this House in March 2003, I welcome the Chilcot report. I shall focus my remarks on two specific issues—first, my own motive for supporting the motion authorising force, and secondly, post-conflict planning. Chilcot offers an interesting and detailed analysis of the processes within the Government at the time and the status of the intelligence that was used to justify the action that followed. Given the exhaustive detail examined and the time invested in arriving at the conclusions in the report, I do not intend to criticise what it has to say.

Up until the time of the vote, my own position had been that although I accepted that UN Security Council resolution 1441 provided sufficient authority for any action, it would have been better to have secured a second Security Council resolution. I say that even though there had been 14 previous Security Council resolutions, which had been passed on the widely held assumption that Saddam Hussein did have the capacity to use weapons of mass destruction and was prepared to do so. Indeed, it was well documented that he had in the past used such weapons against the Iraqi people. However, when President Chirac effectively vetoed any further UN Security Council resolution, it seemed to me—
Caroline Lucas rose—

**Mr Howarth:** I will not give way to the hon. Lady because I have very limited time.

It seemed to me that resolution 1441 and all the previous resolutions had to be upheld; otherwise, international collective will would have been meaningless.

There was, however, another important humanitarian reason why I felt compelled to support the proposed action. Having spoken to many Iraqis who were on the receiving end of vicious attacks and repression by Saddam Hussein’s regime, particularly Iraqi Kurds, I felt strongly that the course of non-action would be an abdication of humanitarian responsibility. That viewpoint was very much influenced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), who had unrivalled knowledge about what was actually happening in Iraq at the time and the appalling abuse of human rights that by then was beyond question.

Following the action in Iraq in 2003, I visited both Baghdad and Basra in March 2005, together with the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) who, at the time, was the Member for Henley. The purpose of that visit was to attend the inauguration of the Transitional National Assembly. In an article in The Spectator of 19 March 2005, following the visit, he concluded:

“It could all still just about work, and if it does, I think it will still be possible to draw a positive balance on this venture.”

In an interview in the North Wales edition of the Daily Post on 18 March 2005, another member of the delegation, Elfyn Llwyd, the then Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, said that although he had opposed the action in Iraq,

“Politicians across the spectrum do not want us to withdraw immediately.”

The then hon. Member for Henley concluded his Spectator article with the words of an Iraqi Minister:

“Thank you, people of Britain, for what you have done! We give you our thanks and our praise and our love. You built this country eight decades ago, and it didn’t work. Now you are giving us our thanks and our praise and our love. You built this and it has to work.”

I cannot regret the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. What I do regret is the fact that the post-conflict planning was not successful.

5.30 pm

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): It is always a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth).

I listened with great interest to the account given by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), who described the read before us as compelling. I have to say that I did not find it as much of a page-turner as he evidently did, but I did get as far as volume 12, which deals with the welfare of those who participated in the Iraq war. That volume brings out a number of key findings, and that is particularly important today, with the publication of the Public Accounts Committee report on service family accommodation, which is less than obliging.

The key findings raise a number of issues that are of importance to my constituents, particularly in relation to inquests involving those who, sadly, died during the conflict. The report points to the huge backlog in inquests, which was evident at the time. If we are to honour the military covenant, we really have to understand the implications of these things for the welfare of families.

However, I am pleased to find in volume 12 that there is also some good news in all of this, and that is to do with the way in which our medical services configured and prepared themselves in the run-up to the conflict. I say that because I was—I have to declare an interest—a member of the Defence Medical Services, and I served in Iraq in late 2003 in a medical capacity. Volume 12 is therefore very much a mixed blessing in terms of the account it gives of the way we prepared for and executed our duties under the military covenant.

I voted against the Iraq war in 2003—it seemed to me at the time that the case had not been made. However, I understand full well that Members on both sides of the House voted in good conscience, one way or the other. In truth, few of us were in full possession of the facts at the time, and most of us made a judgment call. However, of all the many Divisions I have participated in over the past 15 years, that is the one I feel best and most comfortable about.

The situation in 2003 stemmed from the strategic defence review in 1998 and the new chapter added to it two years later, after the 9/11 attack. In that review, we saw the reconfiguration of our armed forces into what was called a “force for good”. In other words, our armed forces would be there not simply for national defence and security, but for something much beyond that—expedientary things of the sort we saw subsequently to good effect in Kosovo and Sierra Leone. The problem is that that was then extrapolated to Iraq—a much bigger deal—and came up against the sofa government, conspiracy of optimism and group-think that have been referred to, together with the ingrained idea that Saddam must have had weapons of mass destruction and the intent to use them, despite evidence to the contrary and despite wise counsel at the time from a number of sources. Crucially for me, the null hypothesis— the idea that weapons of mass destruction did not exist—was never constructed or tested. That was a huge failing, which I hope the structural changes that have
been put in place subsequently—particularly around the National Security Council—will now make unlikely in the future.

The right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett), who is not in her place, suggested that the concept of a just war, which is familiar to anybody who has been to staff college, is some sort of religious thing, but it fundamentally is not, and it underpins much of our law in this area. It is vital to establish the idea of a just war and to discuss whether this was, in fact, a just war. Chilcot tells us absolutely clearly that military action was not seen as a last resort. Last resort is a fundamental, underpinning precept of a just war. One cannot have a just war if one could have achieved one’s objectives by other means falling short of out-and-out warfare.

For me, that means that the Iraq war was not a just war. That matters—it really matters—because we ask our men and women in uniform to do extraordinary things and authorise them to do remarkable things. They have no choice in the matter, but they have every right to expect that we should make sure that they are not being sent on a fool’s errand or, worse, one of questionable legality or legitimacy. Instead, in March 2003, my constituents and others were dispatched to an expeditionary war that Chilcot painstakingly takes apart as disastrous and unnecessary: a war that was waged despite intelligence and other evidence that was not clear; a war whose lack of planning and provisioning cost brave men their lives; a war that was, in short, sheer bloody chaos. It was the biggest foreign policy disaster since Suez, the consequences of which we are living with today and will do for decades to come.

The author of our part in this believes he is responsible but not to blame. I do not believe that is good enough. We need to be accountable for our actions, and it is not clear to me that the right hon. Gentleman in question has yet been brought to account.

5.36 pm

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I was a Member of this House when we heard the former Prime Minister present his compelling case. I voted to go to war. I did so in the full knowledge that my brother, who was at that time serving with our armed forces, was poised in Kuwait to cross the border as part of one of the first units into Iraq. I want to quote the words of Colonel Tim Collins, then commander of 1 Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment, who were also poised to enter Iraq:

“We go to liberate, not to conquer…We will not fly our flags in our country. We are entering Iraq to free a people and the only thing that will matter is whether the former Prime Minister should be held to account for the advice that he gave Parliament. I am

I believe it is right that we examine the question of whether the former Prime Minister should be held to account for the advice that he gave Parliament. I am clear that I voted to go to war based on the advice—the information—that he laid before this House when we made that decision. It is therefore right that we examine the advice that he gave, or the information that he made available to us, and consider whether he potentially misled this House. We will listen carefully to what others have to say before we decide how to vote on this question, but we have an open mind on the matter. We pay tribute to our armed forces, especially to those who laid down their lives in Iraq, and to their families.

I have to say in defence of the former Prime Minister, whom I have heard called a number of things in recent weeks, that I worked very closely with him on the peace process in Northern Ireland, and the idea that he is a terrorist, or a supporter of terrorism, is wrong. No one did more to bring an end to terrorism in Northern Ireland, or at least as far as it goes at the present time, than the former Prime Minister. While sometimes I disagreed with the way that he went about things in Northern Ireland, and sometimes he acted with the best of intentions with regard to Iraq, but I do not think he was wholly honest with this House in the information that he put before us. We need to address that.

The other issue that we are concerned about is the resources that were made available. I do not believe that the soldiers and armed forces on the frontline were properly equipped. We need to address that. It is not good enough for us to send our armed forces to war without equipping them properly. Nor is it good enough for us to send them to war without a clear exit strategy or plan, or to walk away, as we did in 2007, without having finished the job properly. It is not right to adopt such a cut-and-run policy. When we go into a country, we cannot walk away without fully considering the consequences and following through on that. We need to not only identify lessons from the report, but act on them, and to ensure in particular that our armed forces receive the support they require when we send them into combat. That is vital.

One of the things that flowed from the Iraq war was the need to support our veterans who have sustained injuries, to their physical and—as in many cases—their mental health. We are not doing enough. I fully support the armed forces covenant and welcome what this Government have endeavoured to do, but the reality is that too many of us are dealing with constituents who are not receiving the help that they need as a result of the consequences of their service to our country.

Yes, let us accept that we have a collective responsibility to learn the political lessons that flow from the report, and let us consider whether we need to hold to account those who guided this House to its decision to send our armed forces to war in Iraq: but let us also ensure that the men and women who served our country on the foot of that decision get the support that they need when they are in combat and when they are injured as a result of combat.

5.42 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Weapons of mass destruction were held to be a vital part of the justification for war. The Chilcot report found that
Given the messages from Chilcot and from this debate, that message is as apposite today as it was then. In trying to change the middle east, we should not look to overthrow authoritarian regimes that we do not like. Rather, we should deal with what is a threat to our society and our people. ISIS is a threat to our society and our people, but regimes such as that of Assad are not necessarily such a threat.

I went on to say:

“The most difficult of the three factors is intent. What would Saddam gain by attacking the west, apart from his own immediate destruction? Has he not outlawed all his foreign and domestic opponents by being at least rational and not suicidal? I do not think that anyone seriously suggests that he intends to attack the west. Would he attack Israel, which already has a nuclear deterrent? Is the proposed attack really about a new concept of global thinking? That is the issue. Is the Truman doctrine—the concept of deterrence that has preserved peace and stability for more than 50 years—to be replaced by a new Bush doctrine of using a pre-emptive strike to overthrow dangerous regimes that could pose a threat?”

I repeat that these messages are as true for us today as they were then. We should abide by the Truman doctrine of containment and deterrence, and not necessarily seek to impose our ideas on regimes that we dislike.

I went on to say:

“Where will the Bush doctrine take us? Where will it stop? What are the tests? A military junta is allowed to acquire a nuclear weapon in Pakistan but not in Iraq and, presumably, not in North Korea or Iran. Pakistan was only righting the balance with India, and Saddam would claim that he was righting the balance with Israel.

I do not believe that the case for attacking Iraq unilaterally, without the UN, has yet been made. That is not to say that it is wrong to threaten force—that is the only language that Saddam understands. No doubt there will be weeks of frustration. No doubt when the UN teams go in there will be more frustration and delays. However, the fact remains that after 1998, the UN contained Saddam and kept him on some sort of leash.

Finally, I remain of the belief that it is safe to contain rather than to threaten destruction of Saddam’s regime. If he is threatened with destruction, he could act irrationally, with incalculable consequences for the world community. Let us march in step with fellow permanent members of the UN Security Council and insist on weapons inspections, backed by the use of international force if they are not complied with. That is the right path to take.”

I believe that Chilcot is a powerful testimony for us all today. Never again must we be led astray along a path towards a dangerous war such as the one that has unleashed untold misery in Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of people have died as a result of decisions taken in this House. I say never again. As ordinary Members of Parliament, if this ever happens again, we must be prepared to question the Executive and, whatever the cost to our career, vote against that Executive and vote down war.

5.49 pm

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to all who served in the forces in Iraq, especially those, and the families of those, who were injured or lost their lives. It is absolutely clear from this debate and from last week’s statement that the Chilcot report will never settle arguments about whether the war was right or wrong, but it should lay to rest allegations about bad faith, lies or deceit.

First, the report finds that there was no falsification or misuse of intelligence by Tony Blair or No. 10. Secondly, it finds that there was no attempt to deceive Cabinet Ministers. Thirdly, it finds that there was no
secret pact with the US to go to war. That means there is no justification for saying that evidence was “confected” or that the case for war was a “deception”, which is exactly what the Leader of the Opposition claimed in his response last week. He claimed that it created a colonial-style occupation, although the UN endorsed the west’s presence after the invasion, and the 2005 elections and referendum on a new constitution gave power to Iraqis.

To listen to Tony Blair’s critics, anyone would think that Iraq had been a peaceful haven of tranquillity before 2003, but nothing could be further from the truth. In Iraq, Saddam Hussain perpetrated the largest-scale chemical weapons attack against civilians in history, killing thousands. He led a brutal reprisal against Iraq’s Shia majority, slaughtering up to 100,000 Iraqis in just one month—more than in any year since 2003. Abroad, he supported terrorism, offering al-Qaeda sanctuary, training and assistance in planning attacks.

The report does not say that Tony Blair ordered the falsification of intelligence that stated that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction. UN resolutions required Saddam to demonstrate that weapons of mass destruction did not exist, but he acted as though they did, presumably because that helped him to subjugate his people. His refusal to co-operate with UN inspectors led intelligence services right around the world to believe that he did, in fact, possess those weapons. Even countries that were opposed to military action, such as France, Russia and Germany, believed that he had those weapons. The debate in 2003 was not about whether Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction, but about how to deal with them.

Of course, we must learn the lessons of mistakes made after the invasion of Iraq, but we must also learn the lessons of not taking action. British intervention in Kosovo and Sierra Leone prevented people from being slaughtered. Libya was already in a brutal civil war before western air forces prevented Gaddafi from killing innocent people in Benghazi, but without support afterwards the country is a huge problem for the whole of north Africa and the wider region. Not intervening in Syria did not prevent the world’s worst humanitarian catastrophe, hundreds of thousands of deaths or millions of refugees, let alone terrorist attacks not just in Syria but in Tunisia and Europe.

I also want to deal with the claim that toppling Saddam led to ISIS or, as we are so often told, plunged the middle east into chaos. As Martin Chulov, The Guardian’s middle east editor and author of a definitive study of ISIS, says:

“The Syrian civil war was not driven by Isis. It fed directly out of the Arab awakenings and was a bid to oust a ruthless regime from power. Assad could not have prevailed against the will of the streets. So he tried to transform the uprising into something that was driven by internationally-backed global jihad. Isis grew out of the chaos. They flourished with Assad’s direct and indirect support until they became a monster no one could control.”

None of that will make the slightest bit of difference to Tony Blair’s critics, to the critics of the Government of the day who took those decisions or, especially, to those on the hard left. The facts make no difference at all to those people, because they are implacably opposed to the UK or other western countries ever taking military action.

Ian Austin: I said earlier that, clearly, mistakes were made after the invasion. But let us be honest; the charge that is made against Tony Blair and the Government of the time is of falsification and misuse of intelligence, and of wilfully misleading this House and the rest of the country. That is what people are saying, and I think the Chilcot report proves beyond doubt that none of those charges is true.

Caroline Lucas: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Austin: No, I will not give way, because other people want to speak.

Tony Blair’s critics on the hard left opposed every attempt to use British forces, not just in Iraq or Syria, but even in Kosovo, where the UK intervened to prevent thousands of people from being slaughtered. The right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) described that at the time as “unpardonable folly”, even though Britain was intervening to prevent genocidal slaughter. I will take no lectures from the SNP on these issues.

The leader of the Labour party was a founder member and chair of the Stop the War coalition—an organisation that, under his leadership, praised what it said was the “internationalism and solidarity” of ISIS, and compared it to the international brigades. It supported what it called the Iraqi “struggle” against British troops “by any means necessary”, and among many other appalling things, it said that it stood with Saddam Hussein, compared Assad to Churchill, and promoted or provided a platform for Assad apologists. For the hard left, the world is a simple place: all the problems are caused by the west, and the solutions are easy.

Sir Edward Leigh: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Austin: No, I will not give way. Of course we must learn the lessons from Iraq, but let us make sure we learn the right ones. For me, the central lesson is that taking action can lead to terrible consequences, and military action anywhere in the world involves huge risks. However, there can also be terrible consequences from not intervening. If we learn the wrong lessons, we might have fewer Iraqs but we could easily have more Syrias. Perhaps we ought to consider a Chilcot-style inquiry into the consequences of not intervening in Syria, where people have been slaughtered or displaced in their millions.

5.56 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I declare an interest in this report because I served in the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, and along with many colleagues from all parties in the House—some of whom are not here today—I was proud to serve my country.
and to stand with many enormously honourable men and women who did their best in very difficult circumstances.

I will not fight over and again the battles being fought this afternoon about Tony Blair and his guilt or otherwise, because I would rather move forward and speak about the United Kingdom's strategy and how on earth we got ourselves into a position that meant we were so clearly acting against our own national interests. We seem to have got into a position where the only answer was to be as close as possible to the United States, and to use force at a time when other options were available. The only answer seemed to be to follow the wishes of a Prime Minister who, although he sounded powerful at the time, was clearly too weak to invite challenge, even in his own private Cabinet. For me, those are the real worries—how could we have got to that stage? There are, of course, many reasons for that, and yet Chilcot lists them. Today, the question is how we get out of that.

The National Security Council, introduced by the previous Prime Minister, was an excellent invention, and I look forward to our current Prime Minister taking it forward, and introducing to the various Departments that contribute to the NSC the elements that feed into it. In my former Department—I mean that as an employee rather than as a Minister, although the Prime Minister may yet call; the evening is young—the Chiefs of Staff Committee established an impressive group by going back to an old idea.

In the period between the two wars, the Chiefs of Staff Committee invented a group constantly to challenge the Treasury, the Foreign Office, and other Departments, so that they could be prepared should the worst happen. That meant that, although those Departments were not as ready as we would have liked, at least in 1939 the 10-year rule that the Treasury had imposed was no longer in force, and we were rearming and able to defend ourselves against Nazi aggression. That Committee was reformed in the Ministry of Defence under the former Chief of the Defence Staff, General Richards, and it is great, but other Departments have done less well. I will not run through them, but it seems incumbent on those who have the authority to command embassies, aid work and armies, also to be responsible for ensuring that the strategies they prepare and advise Ministers to follow are right for the United Kingdom, and not just expedient for a quick relationship with the US.

I very much welcome what my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said about the Truman doctrine. He is right, but the Truman doctrine should not be simply a reassertion of Westphalian principles. It must today be updated with the concept of the Responsibility to Protect that the UN has made so clear over the past few years. It is right that we avoid Iraq, but it is also right that we avoid Rwanda or Srebrenica. The great error of Iraq is that it did exactly the reverse of the right to protect: it put people in greater danger. This did not happen everywhere. The Kurdish communities were often better defended because they were armed. The reality, however, was the spread of insurgency and trouble. It is hard to argue that we improved the situation, although it is very difficult to know whether we made it worse.

As we move on from that period, it is incumbent on us to consider the legal aspect. We have been talking today about the legality of the war and holding the leader in contempt, but I would like to look closely at how we hold soldiers to account. The spread of lawfare into combat zones has changed the nature of command dramatically in the past 50 to 60 years. The concept of combat immunity has been increasingly eroded. Young lieutenants and young corporals, junior leaders in the armed forces who took decisions at the age of 19, 20 or 21 in the heat of battle, are being tried today, five or 10 years later, in the cool of the courtroom. They are being tried by people who do not and cannot understand the pressures on them at that time and at that moment. They are being held to account in a way that is not only unfair but immoral. It is we here in this place who hold the responsibility for war, not the young men we send.

6.2 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the very passionate speech by the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). I pay tribute to him for his service in the Iraq war.

In 2003, The Sun ran a story under the headline “Open Fire on Traitors”.

It meant “cowards and traitors” such as Robin Cook, Charles Kennedy and other Members from all parties of the House, all of whom stood up for their principles, spoke out against Tony Blair’s war and were vilified for it. Alongside these figures stood the 1 million people who marched on the streets of London to make their case and the 80,000 people who took to the streets of Glasgow. We were not traitors and it is not cowardly to promote a minority view. At that time, it was a minority view to champion peace over war, and we now know that war was not the last resort. It took courage and bravery, and we in this House must be courageous, brave and honest by calling out a predetermined commitment to war and a failure of government for what it was—just that.

Ian Austin: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I will not be giving way.

The publication of the Chilcot report last week was a vindication of all those in Parliament and across the country who were vilified for opposing this terrible, unnecessary and ultimately failed war. It exposed the sorry tale of misleading statements that preceded the House’s decision to support military action, and put our servicemen and servicewomen in harm’s way. We cannot allow that to happen again.

When I began reading the Chilcot report last week, my first thoughts were with the families of those servicemen and servicewomen, and those who have been saddled with the physical and mental scars of that war. Families such as that of Lance Corporal Andrew Craw from Tullibody in my constituency, who died in Iraq on 7 January 2004. How must they have been feeling when they read the report? They now know that we entered into a failed war, as Chilcot said, without adequate support for our own troops or proper thought for the aftermath and the millions of people in Iraq. To see these families’ bravery and dignity, as they publicly responded to the report last week, was humbling and
inspiring. It is worthy of note that Blair’s team of spin doctors had 18 months to look at the sections of the report referring to him, whereas the families were given three hours. They must be reassured that Parliament takes its role seriously and acts truthfully at all times. They deserve no less.

The reports make it clear that there was a complete absence of the Cabinet government essential to ensure the vital issue of national security. The evidence shows that Ministers around the Cabinet table did not effectively challenge the decision to take us to war or devote their energies to planning efficiently for the aftermath of the campaign of shock and awe at the outset of military operations. Most of all, it lays bare what took place in order that they might win the hearts and minds of the country and this House. As we have heard, Tony Blair said in his note to George Bush:

“I will be with you, whatever”—whatever the facts, whatever the circumstances, whatever the consequences! What a damning indictment of a diminished figure!

As Tony Blair’s memos to President Bush demonstrate, he said one thing in this place and another behind closed doors. He stood here, in this place, and claimed that these acts were predicated on Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction, but confirmed in writing to President Bush in private that regime change was their goal. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) has articulated five falsehoods in the lead-up to the parliamentary decision in 2003 and in connection to the post-conflict plans. Paragraph 630 of the executive summary is indeed damning.

These actions have led to around 1 million Iraqi children under 18—about 5% of Iraqi children—losing one or both parents and resulted in 70% of children in Iraq suffering from trauma-related symptoms. This is not about binding the hands of Tony Blair’s successors but about showing that facts and evidence are central to everything we do. Lessons must be learned and the mistakes of the past must not be repeated. A modern Parliament needs a modern approach to transparency and accountability. If the public cannot trust what is said here, it places in peril our whole parliamentary system. Parliament must act now to protect its own integrity.

As I prepared for today’s debate, I reread the speech that my predecessor, Sir George Reid, made to the Scottish Parliament prior to war in 2003. He said:

“Above the doors of the Red Cross in Geneva, there is a phrase from Dostoevsky, which we should remember in time of war. It states that, in war, ‘Everyone is responsible to everyone for everything.’”

This House now has a responsibility to hold the former Prime Minister to account for his actions. This would be not a judicial process but a parliamentary one, for which there is precedent. This is our responsibility and we should rise to it.

6.7 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. I want to look at two elements: first, the legal recriminations against our soldiers, as touched on by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat); and secondly, the point raised by several Members about our preparedness for war. I would like briefly to comment on that, as a former soldier.

First, I pay tribute to the 179 members of our armed forces who lost their lives, the many others wounded and, of course, the tens of thousands of civilians who died as a consequence of the war. It was an appalling tragedy. I make no apology for returning to the subject of servicemen and women being persecuted for fighting a war in Iraq at the behest of their political masters and under the most difficult circumstances. During the now former Prime Minister’s response to the publication of the report of the Chilcot inquiry on 6 July, I asked for his assurance that, just as there would be no recriminations against those who sent our armed forces to war, so there would be none against our armed forces themselves.

He replied:

“We are doing everything we can to get through and knock down these wholly unjustified inquiries, because by and large, as we would expect, British forces behaved entirely properly.”—[Official Report, 6 July 2016; Vol. 612, c. 907.]

The fact remains, however, that in an official statement to The Sunday Telegraph on 2 July, the International Criminal Court confirmed that it had already begun a preliminary examination of claims of torture and abuse by British soldiers after receiving a dossier from human rights lawyers acting for alleged Iraqi victims. The ICC prosecutors will comb through the 2.3 million words in the report for the evidence of war crimes committed by British troops. The ICC has added that the decision to go to war remains outside its remit. That, of course, exonerates former Prime Minister Blair, but I do not want to get deeply involved in that particular point in my short speech.

Many of us have already put on record how deeply disturbing we find the relentless pursuit of our servicemen and women by unscrupulous and opportunistic lawyers, actively inviting fabrications and fantasies. Although, regrettably, there is a need for the Iraq Historic Allegations Team, known as IHAT, its most recent report published on 31 March this year makes it clear that many of the claims are indeed fabrications and fantasies.

At that point, IHAT had received 3,281 allegations of potential criminal behaviour. Nearly 1,000 of them were screened out and did not progress to the investigations stage, while 742 remain at the initial assessment stage. IHAT is therefore currently investigating allegations relating to 1,558 potential victims, of which 288 are alleged unlawful killings and 1,270 are alleged ill treatment, ranging from common assault to serious sexual and violent assault. IHAT has closed, or is in the process of closing, investigations into 59 allegations of unlawful killing. In 56 of those cases—93%—the allegation of criminal behaviour was found to be not sustainable, meaning that there was no truth in it. Let me make the point that if we in this place send our brave men and women to war, we have got to protect them from this sort of activity when they come back. In my view, it is a disgrace.

Let me finish by briefly touching on several points raised by several hon. Members of all parties about whether we are prepared for war. Chilcot touches on this and criticises the Government of the day because the armed forces were not as prepared as they could have been. Speaking as someone who served in the
military for nine years and as an avid reader of military history—my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling would agree with me on this—I cannot think of a time at any point in our history when our armed forces have been 100% ready for a specific operation. In the second world war, our tanks could not outgun the German tanks for at least two or three years into the war. I wonder what we would say now if that circumstance were repeated—it would be interesting, would it not? Of course our armed forces should have the best kit. The point I am trying to make is that when we send our brave men and women to war in future—regrettably, we will—we have got to think very hard whether they have the right kit for the particular type of warfare required for the particular conflict zone.

Neil Gray: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s speech, but does he accept that what was then a politically expedient decision of the Prime Minister to delay the military in preparing, and the subsequent lack of equipment, could have cost some of my brother’s colleagues and some of the colleagues of the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) their lives? That is the fundamental point.

Richard Drax: Because of the delay and the realisation that this was going to be a major conflict—an invasion of a country—one could sensibly argue that there was not sufficient kit to back the invasion. I absolutely concur with that. The first thing that goes into chaos—the first thing that goes wrong—the moment troops are sent into battle, is at the point of contact. It all goes haywire because that is what war is about. We in this place must learn that if we send troops into a conflict zone—a desert environment, for example, as it was in Iraq—we must make sure that they have the right kit for that environment. If they are going to fight in a jungle, we will need to make sure that there are plenty of helicopters to support them.

Look at the Falklands war. I was serving at that time, and many of my friends went there. We were desperately short of all kinds of kit. In fact, had the Argentinians dug in and fought harder, it is questionable whether the number of brave men and women we had down there would have actually won that war. We were literally at the point of running out of ammunition, helicopters and all the things we needed to execute the war.

My point is this. When we send those men and women to war again—as sadly we will—we must think very seriously indeed in this place, “Have they got the kit to do the job we are asking them to do?” There is no point, months down the line, bleating, “Oh dear, they haven’t got enough helicopters”—or ships, or whatever it is.

Let me end by saying exactly what my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling said. If we are going to send our brave men and women to war again—and they are incredibly brave—we must look at the Chilcot report and learn the lessons. I am not in the blame game; I was not here at the time so I did not vote, but for heaven’s sake, let us think very carefully next time.

6.15 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I remember the events that we are discussing very well. They took place during my second Parliament as an MP, and they were not really the sort of stuff that I thought I had come here for. I remember how seriously people in and around the House discussed the issues in the run-up to the vote. I recall intense debates with colleagues and friends both inside and outside Parliament and, of course, I recall friends coming to different conclusions. According to my recollection, no one treated the issue lightly, and I do not think there is anyone who does not regret the loss of life. However, as one of those who were here at the time, and as someone who voted for the war, I take the view that we must all take some of the responsibility. We must bear some collective responsibility.

The only Cabinet resignation that I recall was that of the late Robin Cook. All the others stood firm and stayed on board, so they had a collective responsibility as well. While I understand that some folk are desperate to pin all this on one man, it is hard to see how that stands up in those circumstances. Of course there are legitimate criticisms and lessons to be learned, and I certainly accept the point about “sofa” versus Cabinet government, but Lord Turnbull actually said that he was talking about a style of government, and he also said in evidence that it was a “professional forum” and he was not talking about a bunch of advisers and cronies getting together. He was very clear about that, but it was not the impression that was given earlier.

Obviously one of the big lessons is about intelligence. I acknowledge that the Government have taken a significant step forward in that regard, but it is appalling to think that M16 knew that one of its principal sources of intelligence was a fraud, and chose not to share that with the Government before the vote. We should never let that sort of thing happen again. As for war planning and post-invasion planning, and what we have just heard about equipment, there are clear lessons to be learned, but they are not just lessons for politicians. They are lessons for intelligence officers, for the Ministry of Defence, and for senior military figures.

Part of the purpose of the Chilcot report is to enable us all to learn lessons. The tragedy is that if it is reduced simply to an attempt to pin it all on one man, we will not learn many lessons. If, after 13 years, the best outcome is a contempt motion, where will we end up? Will we end up back here saying, “What about the late Baroness Thatcher? We have found out some more details about the Belgrano”—or the Gibraltar assassinations—“so let us table a motion on that”? Will we end up saying that the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr Cameron) should be hauled back because of some new revelation, or apparent revelation, about Libya? I do not think that that is what we should be trying to do.

I recognise that Tony Blair is a Marmite figure, but we did have a parliamentary vote to go to war. It was not all down to him. Nowhere in the report does Chilcot accuse him of misleading Parliament, and I really do not think that we should use this House to try to settle old scores or enmities. We should be better than that. We need to recognise the risk that will be posed in the future, when there are difficult choices to be made, if we get this wrong. Real political leadership is not about settling scores, scoring points or addressing rallies; it is about taking really tough and difficult decisions. We should be very careful in our response to Chilcot, because if we get this wrong, we could put ourselves in a
situation where the new Prime Minister, and any future Prime Minister, will be frightened to make a brave decision.

It is possible to make a brave choice and make the wrong choice, and we all know with the benefit of hindsight that there are elements of the Iraq situation that we would deal with differently, but if we turn this into a simple exercise of trying to pin the blame on one man in order to settle longstanding scores, we will do nothing to advance our ability to deal with difficult conflict situations in the future. This House needs to be bigger than that.

6.20 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), a colleague on the Work and Pensions Committee.

In six minutes I will not be able to do justice to 2.6 million words delivered just seven days ago, but I want to draw three reflections from what I have read over the last week and what I have studied over the last several years.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak spoke about a brave choice but the wrong choice. I do not want the substance of my remarks to be what the former Prime Minister did; I want to focus on what Government must do differently next time. The lessons of Chilcot need to be absorbed across the whole of Government. There are massive issues in terms of the deference to the US and the assumptions made about what was happening when in fact it was not. There was a misunderstanding about the reality on the ground and an abuse of process in the way the decision was made.

We have got to get this right. I acknowledge what the outgoing Prime Minister has said on the establishment of the National Security Council, the national security adviser, and the creation of a conflict, stability and security fund. Those are sensible measures to try and mitigate the risks around a decision being made at the behest of our largest and most powerful ally. But what actually happened back in 2002 and 2003 was the abuse by a Prime Minister of the processes of government, by moving the decision more quickly without presenting the evidence clearly. As Members of Parliament, we want to be able to say that we make decisions in the knowledge of all the information that we should reasonably have at our disposal. It is imperative that we make decisions in that way in the future.

We need to resist making decisions before the evaluation of the implications has been completed. I do not say I could have known exactly what was going to happen and therefore would have made a different decision from that the House collectively made in 2003. The media will always focus on atrocities and the risks associated with not acting, and there will always be a short-term risk to lives, but the danger is that if we do not commission officials to systematically evaluate the different options, incorporating a detailed analysis, as Chilcot’s summary says, and look at the capabilities we have before making a decision, we are not putting ourselves in the best place to make the decision in the right way. It seems to me that the collective view is likely to be optimistic. We can always be persuaded in the face of the authority of Government to move forward at their urgings, and unless we have that evidence presented to us, we will not be in the position to do so.

The most striking conclusion of the Chilcot report for me is the lack of preparation for what came after. In 2014-15, I had the privilege of doing the Royal College of Defence Studies senior course, alongside senior officers. When I spoke to them privately, they confirmed there had been no expectation that Saddam would be toppled as quickly as he was, and no understanding of what would be required afterwards. The Chilcot summary states:

“UK officials recognised that occupying forces would not remain welcome for long”.

It also states that “the best possible appreciation of the theatre of operations, including the political, cultural and ethnic background” was a “fundamental element” of “vital importance” which was “lacking”.

There seems to have been a complete failure on the part of the Government, as well as a complete lack of collective analysis by our military, our intelligence services and our politicians, in not asking really searching questions, given the obvious challenges relating to culture and religious history and the social problems that would inevitably be unlocked as a consequence of the lack of government following the fall of Saddam. The failure to carry out that analysis or to establish a credible plan was the real failing, and that must never be allowed to happen again. Having had a week to reflect on this, I believe that Governments must behave differently. I welcome the changes that have taken place, including the fact that Ministries now work more closely together, but we cannot allow a Prime Minister to wield such authority again without a degree of scrutiny of the detail. Information must be made available more widely to the House.

6.26 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) said earlier, Sir John Chilcot’s extensive report provides a comprehensive and detailed analysis of one of the most shameful and disgraceful failures of British foreign policy. Sir John quite rightly points a finger squarely at the former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who he says led the United Kingdom into a war in Iraq “before the peaceful options for disarmament had been exhausted.”

There cannot be a more damning set of words than that among the 2.5 million words of Sir John’s report. Tony Blair stands accused: while peace was still an option, he as the British Prime Minister chose war. And why? Because he had promised his friend George Bush that he would. The revelation of the memo saying “I will be with you, whatever” exposes Mr. Blair’s desire to help President Bush to achieve regime change in Iraq as the primary motivating force behind the invasion—an invasion, as we have heard oft times this afternoon, that cost the lives of 179 British service personnel and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians.

In his report, Sir John makes it clear that there were the makings of a dirty deal to pursue regime change in Iraq as far back as 2001. So from the very outset of this
calamitous misadventure, it appears that Tony Blair was more concerned with presentation, and with having and maintaining influence in the White House, than with doing what he should have been doing—that is, meticulously preparing and planning to ensure that UK service personnel would have the best equipment and the best possible intelligence ahead of an invasion. He singularly failed to do that, and today Tony Blair stands accused of overseeing a complete failure in military planning that left our armed forces vulnerable and with insufficient equipment, once the invasion was under way. Despite his knowing since December 2001 that war was an almost inevitable consequence of his deal with President Bush, there were still serious equipment shortfalls when war came in early 2003. Exactly one week before the invasion took place, it transpired that the new desert kit would not be ready in time, and our troops left for Iraq with insufficient body armour and ammunition. The shortfall of desert equipment amounted to 18,300 suits and 12,500 pairs of boots. That is absolutely shocking.

Even before a shot had been fired in Iraq, our service personnel had been badly let down by their Government’s abject failure to plan properly for a conflict they had long known was going to occur. Worse—much worse—was to come once the immediate invasion was over. The lack of a post-invasion strategy once Saddam Hussein’s army had been defeated meant that British troops were woefully unprepared to operate in a country that was descending into chaos and anarchy. That was to have disastrous consequences for many, including the soldiers of the Black Watch.

The Chilcot report reveals that on 21 October 2004 Tony Blair misled his own Cabinet on the risk of deploying the regiment to north Babil—an area known as the “triangle of death”. Cabinet minutes show that Blair told his Cabinet that “the danger to which they”—the Black Watch—“would be exposed was not qualitatively different from that which they had experienced to date in their current tour.” However, we now know that Mr Blair had received intelligence that very same day warning that north Babil would be “more hostile to a UK presence than the population in Southern Iraq” and that “the presence of UK forces will attract insurgent attacks.”

Sir Kevin Tebbit, the then permanent under-secretary at the Ministry of Defence, had already warned that “there would be a casualty issue” for the Black Watch. How sadly prophetic those words were. On 5 November 2004, three Black Watch soldiers—Sergeant Stuart Gray, aged 31 from Dunfermline, Private Paul Lowe, aged 19 from Fife, and Private Scott McArdle, aged 22 from Glenrothes—were killed and eight of their colleagues injured.

It is abundantly clear from the report that there was absolutely no proper plan to win the war or to secure the peace. One of the report’s key findings is that although it appears that Mr Blair understood the importance of securing peace, he did not seek assurances from the US President and did not make such a plan a condition of our involvement. Sir John makes it clear that as Iraq descended into absolute chaos neither DFID nor the Foreign Office was willing, prepared or equipped to accept responsibility for reconstruction. Had there been a plan, the outcome would have been markedly different. The humanitarian crisis we have seen since could have been avoided and a fertile recruiting ground for extremists would not have emerged from the chaos. It was the failure to plan that put the lives of many of our servicemen and women in such grave danger. The country remains a hotbed of extremism to this day. Lessons have to be learned from the shambles that was the Iraq war. People have to be called to account for their actions and we can never allow this to happen again.

6.32 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): No one doubts that Saddam was a brutal tyrant, but few would now dispute that the Iraq invasion was the biggest foreign policy failure of recent times. The Chilcot report provides detailed confirmation that military intervention was by no means a last resort, that all other avenues were not exhausted, that Iraq posed no immediate threat to the UK and, crucially, that hindsight was not necessary to see those things.

There has been talk in the House that a contempt motion may come forward next week. If one does, I will support it, because I believe that Tony Blair was responsible for fixing evidence around a policy while telling us that he was doing the opposite. In so doing, he was treating his office, the Cabinet, this House and our constitutional checks and balances with disrespect amounting to contempt.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), who is no longer in his place, said that this process should not be about settling old scores, and I want to assure him that it is not; it is about Parliament doing its job properly. It is not about making a future Prime Minister afraid of taking difficult decisions; it is about ensuring that any future decisions are taken without misleading this House and with a full debate and Cabinet discussion. It is right to hold the former Prime Minister to account, but we must not lose sight of the fact that our political system allowed him to behave as he did. Chilcot reveals failures both systemic and parliamentary that allowed the former Prime Minister to act like a President.

Let me give just one example of those failures. Chilcot found that Parliament endorsed “a decision to invade and occupy a sovereign nation” without UN authority, and that it happened despite the fact that FCO legal advisers were clear in their view that the war was not legal. Lord Goldsmith, who as Attorney General constitutionally had the last word and had raised concerns in 2002, was, in Chilcot’s word, “prevented” from actively advising on the key UN resolution 1441. The Attorney General’s advice 11 days before the vote remained that it was not safe to say that the war was legal, yet a week later he had changed his mind, because the Prime Minister had assured him that Iraq had committed further “material breaches” of resolution 1441. Despite seven years of forensic investigation, Sir John Chilcot tells us that he cannot find the grounds that Tony Blair relied upon when he made that assurance. What is recorded is that Blair did not request, nor did he receive, considered advice on his view. That in itself is an appalling disregard for due process and must never
be allowed to happen again. We must amend our system so that the Attorney General is an independent legal expert and not a political appointee of the Prime Minister.

Let us also reflect on Parliament’s role. How did Members of Parliament come to vote for this terrible folly? We had a chronic and abject failure of the official Opposition. The Tories, with a few very honourable exceptions, simply abandoned the job. The job of opposition was left to the smaller parties and the 139 Labour Back Benchers who opposed the motion to go to war. Time and again we have heard in this House the defence that MPs voted for the war “in good faith”, but MPs are not elected to show good faith; they are elected to show good judgment, based on the evidence. One way to help to guard against this happening in the future would be to replace the royal prerogative on war with a new constitutional convention that includes the idea that votes on war are not subject to party whippings. If that had been the case, more Members might have engaged their own judgment rather than allowing themselves to be taken along on trust.

Although Chilcot does not judge the former Prime Minister’s guilt or innocence, he does bring out themes that I believe support a charge of contempt of Parliament. Let me focus on just one of those. Chilcot shows that a key example of the former Prime Minister fixing evidence around policy was a phone call with George Bush on 12 March 2003. In that call, Blair and Bush agreed to publicly pretend to continue to seek a second UN resolution, knowing that it would not happen, and then to blame France for preventing it. Chilcot reveals that Tony Blair then did two misleading things. He told his Cabinet the next day that work continued in the UN to obtain a second resolution and that the outcome remained open, even though that was not the case. He also went on to repeat a deliberate misrepresentation of the French position, both at Prime Minister’s questions on 12 March and in his key parliamentary statement on 18 March—he even included it in the war motion before the House.

In short, the French position was for more time for the weapons inspectors, but with war as an explicit possibility. The former Prime Minister kept taking out context phrases from an interview by President Chirac given on 10 March, saying that they showed that France would veto a resolution in any circumstances. That was clearly not true, and Chilcot shows that it was not true. The French kept correcting Blair, but Blair instructed Jack Straw, in Chilcot’s words, to “concede nothing”. Clearly that was because he needed to continue the misrepresentation of France to provide cover for his failure to get UN support for the war.

Then we come to the gross misrepresentation of Iraq as a growing threat to the region and the country. Tony Blair said that Saddam’s weapons programme was “active, detailed and growing”, and that the intelligence showing that was extensive, detailed and authoritative. Yet the Joint Intelligence Committee had said just six months earlier:

> Intelligence on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction…and…missile programmes is sporadic and patchy.”

Even just two months before that, Jack Straw had written to Blair warning of “weak intelligence”, and the Butler report tells us that the intelligence between July and September was “unproven”. Over and over again, Tony Blair misled this House, and it is our right to hold him to account.

6.39 pm

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): I have visited Iraq recently, and I visited a country in economic meltdown because of the ongoing conflict in both Iraq and Syria. Iraq is still riven by religious sectarianism, led by what has been described to me as a corrupt and patriarchal family looting the country of its assets and getting rich on its hard-won natural resources. It is a country that has fought and is still losing against al-Qaida, and that is now in the thrall of Daesh, which has crossed the border into Syria. It is a country where more than 200 people died in a car bomb two weeks ago with barely a mention in this place. Where are the half-mast flags? Where is the Iraqi anthem at football games?

Mr Speaker: Order. My apologies to the hon. Lady, but I should have done her the courtesy of telling her what I think she knows, which is that the time limit is now four minutes.

Natalie McGarry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am going through my speech quickly.

Where is the collective grief? Are we so inured to Iraqi deaths? Iraq is a country that cannot control its own borders; a country where its own people—the Yazidis—were, by most accounts, abandoned by Iraqi Government forces and left to Daesh; a country where men and boys were murdered and women and girls raped and passed into sexual slavery. That is the reality of modern, post-invasion Iraq. Is it better or worse than the Saddam regime? It would be entirely careless to speculate, as both are too horrendous to contemplate, and we should not have had to.

When the US and the UK planned for war—and they did indeed plan—peace should have been their objective, but damningly, Chilcot shows that it was the only objective that they did not plan for. I have heard many Members use the attacks against the Kurds as justification for the war on Iraq in 2003. The appalling attack on Halabja and Saddam’s use of chemical weapons on about 5,000 Kurds took place in 1988. The UK is alleged, with strong evidence—and the US too—to have continued to trade weapons to Iraq up to 1991. Then there was the first Gulf war. If enforcing regime change was ever appropriate or legal, that was the opportunity to do so with international support, yet the UK and the US allowed the brutal regime and dictatorship of Saddam Hussein to continue.

This House recently supported airstrikes on Syria, on flimsy evidence at best of 70,000 moderate ground forces actively opposing Daesh forces—the most active of them being the Kurdish YPJ and the YPG—but it consistently fails to support my calls and those of others that the PYD of Rojava, the Kurds, should be given a place at peace talks on the future of Syria. Where is the support for the Kurds who are at the frontline of the battle against Daesh? It is hypocrisy.

The decision to go to war should be the most seriously contended proposition in this place. It should be the most rigorously tested, with every facet and every piece of intelligence investigated and every ramification explored.
Chilcot has eventually exposed the myth about what happened, but a close look at the facts would have revealed the evidence to be flawed.

When this place sends men and women to war without adequate resources, sending some of them into perilous danger ill equipped and improperly attired, there is collective guilt. When the result of that decision is the death of soldiers serving their country and the indiscriminate deaths of innocent civilians—directly or indirectly caused by our military actions—the responsibility for that lies here, in this place, which should have more rigorously challenged the then Prime Minister and the intelligence that was presented.

The cost of the Iraq war is far greater than the £9 billion that the UK Government spent on the conflict. It is the 179 dead British service personnel, the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians killed, the 1 million people displaced and the destabilisation of the middle east, the consequences of which we can see to this day.

We can all profess to regret what happened—indeed, I am sure that everyone does—but if lessons are not learned and we do not correct the collective arrogance that has meant thumbling our nose at the UN and at international partners, mocking them, deriding them and ignoring them, we will repeat the mistakes of the past and the loss of those lives will be even more in vain.

6.43 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I rise today to speak on behalf of the family of Sapper Robert Thompson. He was a 22-year-old Royal Engineer from West Lothian and the 58th British soldier killed in the Iraq war. Robert was a member not only of my constituency, but of my extended family. Like so many families of injured or killed soldiers, his mother, Margaret Valentine, and the rest of his family have had to endure a horrific ordeal: the death of Robert; a six-year civil litigation; the death of soldiers serving their country and the indiscriminate deaths of innocent civilians—directly or indirectly caused by our military actions—the responsibility for that lies here, in this place, which should have more rigorously challenged the then Prime Minister and the intelligence that was presented.

The family had regular phone calls from Robert when he was on tour of duty in Iraq, he suffocated at the bottom of a collapsed trench while trying to replace a floating pontoon. The court reported that the Ministry of Defence had performed no risk assessment in relation to the work that he was tasked with. To get to the truth, Margaret endured six years in court against the Ministry of Defence. It was finally confirmed in 2010 that Sapper Thompson had fallen into an unguarded trench with walls that lacked supports. Lord Bonomy apportioned 80% of the blame for the accident to the MOD and 20% to Robert. Margaret commented at the time:

“It has taken six years and it was never, ever about the money. My laddie died a horrific death. He struggled to get out, but couldn’t. It was about getting here—a judge ruling that there was negligence. It was totally unsafe work and there was no regard for his safety. I always knew he never entered the trench of his own volition.”

Margaret’s solicitor, Patrick McGuire of Thompsons, said that he regarded the accident as “one of the worst examples of a complete disregard for health and safety” that he had seen in his career. A further point that I plan to take up with whoever is the next Defence Secretary is that, according to Robert’s mum, soldiers such as Robert have had their pension retained by the MOD because of a change in legislation, because they died before August 2004. The fact that those soldiers’ pensions are being retained by the MOD is a matter of shame, and I hope that it will look again at the issue.

Robert’s death and the MOD’s reaction reflect the Government’s unpreparedness, short-sightedness and lack of willingness to ensure that our soldiers had the equipment and direction necessary to undertake operations. Sir John Chilcot notes:

“It was not clear which person or department within the Ministry of Defence was responsible for…capability gaps”.

That leads Robert’s family and other families to wonder where the foresight, negotiation and planning were, not to mention the fact that those operations were guided by a foggy strategy to begin with.

My extended family have lost their son and nephew. They have undergone six years in court to understand the truth behind the circumstances. Now, like so many families, they relive his death once more with the release of the Chilcot report. Let us ensure that neither the families’ suffering nor the soldiers’ sacrifice is forgotten. Let us carry these lessons with us in the story of Sapper Robert Thompson.

6.47 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): On Remembrance Day 2007 I attended a ceremony in Glenrothes that none of us ever thought we would have to attend: the unveiling of a war memorial in a town that did not exist at the end of the second world war. The memorial has two names on it—those of Private Marc Ferns, aged 21, and Private Scott McArdle, 22. They were let down by their country. They were sent into an illegal war that was not an act of last resort, and they were sent in without the equipment that they were entitled to have to protect them from enemy attack.

I believe that the Chilcot report establishes those facts beyond doubt. It does not bring those two soldiers back—nothing can bring them back—but Chilcot finally establishes facts that some wanted to keep hidden. It starts to give answers to the families. We need to decide on our response, and part of our early response should
be for this House of Commons to apologise for the dreadful error of judgment that our predecessors in this place made, which cost so many young lives.

There must also be a proper holding to account of those who were responsible, whose conduct has been brought into the full glare of the Chilcot report. It is not about one person; it is about 179 people. It is not about witch hunts or settling old scores, as was ridiculously suggested earlier. It is about applying the principle that nobody, but nobody, is above the law, and that if those in positions of responsibility betray that responsibility, there will be no hiding place from justice.

I do not have time to highlight the specific parts of the executive summary that I believe point unerringly to the conclusion that former Prime Minister Tony Blair deliberately and persistently misled his Cabinet, misled his Government, misled the people of these islands, not about whether he believed that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, but about whether he cared that those weapons of mass destruction existed. He was never interested in a war to disarm; he was only ever interested in a war to achieve regime change. He was acting in support of the policies and interests of a foreign power, even when those were incompatible with the stated policies and objectives of Her Majesty's Government.

It is not correct to talk about the previous Prime Minister committing war crimes, but there is an argument for saying he was in contempt of this House. However, his conduct, had it been carried out by a diplomat, would have led to a trial for treason. It is unthinkable that, simply because he was Prime Minister, he should somehow be immune to any further investigation. It is simply not good enough that he should be allowed to walk away with nothing more than a half-hearted apology and expression of regret.

Even the motion that the House of Commons approved on 18 March 2003 said nothing about regime change. Even at that point, the former Prime Minister was keeping up the pretence; he was arguing about weapons of mass destruction when what he was interested in was overthrowing the regime of Saddam Hussein. The only conclusion I can form is that Tony Blair’s actions were dishonest and misleading from the beginning. As a result, these islands went to a war they should never have taken part in.

Marc Ferns, Scott McArdle and 177 others went to that war and will never come home. We owe it to their memory—we owe it to their families—to make sure that those responsible have the case against them tested in a court of law.

6.51 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I, too, want to confine my observations to the lack of military planning and the lack of equipment provided to our service personnel in Iraq.

Page 127 of the executive summary of the Iraq inquiry says:

“The MOD was slow in responding to the developing threat in Iraq from Improvised Explosive Devices…The range of protected mobility options available to commanders…was limited. Although work had begun before 2002 to source an additional PPV”—

protected patrol vehicle—

“it was only ordered in July 2006 following Ministerial intervention.”

Royal Highland Fusilier Gordon Gentle, who was 19 years old, died in a Snatch Land Rover that was destroyed by a roadside bomb, or IED. He volunteered for the position of top cover—looking out from the top of that vulnerable vehicle. The vehicle travelled from Basra towards the Kuwaiti border—a route dubbed “IED alley” by some soldiers. If the vehicle had been fitted with an electronic jammer—known as an Element B—that device would have blocked the radio signals controlling insurgents’ roadside bombs. Gordon Gentle could still be alive today if that had happened.

Those vehicles were inferior to the replacement Mastiffs, which arrived in the conflict zone two and a half years later. The Snatch Land Rover was not the vehicle that should have been used, when people were constantly trying to blow them up. When Gordon Gentle was killed, the lessons were not learned. Why it took so long for those vehicles to be replaced should be investigated.

Gordon’s mother is Rose Gentle, who has campaigned vigorously to get answers from this inquiry. She wrote to me last night, and she asked me to read this out:

“As a mother that lost her son in the Iraq war I am disgusted and shocked at the way Tony Blair took us into Iraq. He misled Parliament and he misled the whole country. He should be held in contempt. Let the people of the country who vote know that their feelings and their voice matter. Mr Blair cannot be allowed to walk away while military families suffer.”

I concur with those remarks. Rose Gentle has done tremendous work for charities such as Soldiers Off The Street. As I said earlier, she was in London last week to hear the results of the Iraq inquiry.

I support the calls by my right hon. and hon. Friends for Tony Blair to be held to account. However, in addition, it is important that the state issue a formal apology to those who lost loved ones for failing to equip them and for failing to enable them to defend themselves.

6.54 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): We now know that the decision to go to war in Iraq was wrong—not just flawed but utterly wrong. This place was misled; not everyone was fooled, but sufficient to sway the vote. Meanwhile, across the UK, 1.5 million people marched in protest against the war. Their cumulative voice was drowned out by a single voice and its abuse of power. Tony Blair said that those who marched against the war would have “blood on their hands.” I do not know one single person who marched against this war who regrets their action, while apparently Mr Blair now regrets his.

One hundred and seventy-nine British servicemen and women, along with 24 British civilians, were killed; and let us never forget the tens of thousands—hundreds of thousands—of civilians in Iraq who were killed, the 1.25 million orphans this war created, and the destruction of buildings and decimation of communities. The outcome was to radicalise a generation of angry, grieving Iraqis whose lives we turned upside down.

All based on what? There was no evidence of WMD. There was no evidence of Iraq having links to al-Qaeda. Evidence of contact between Iraq and Osama bin Laden was “fragmentary and uncorroborated”. However, Tony Blair still felt fine telling his pal, George W. Bush,

“I will be with you, whatever.”
How did we wage this war? We did as we always do—we sent in our troops with “wholly inadequate military equipment”. This was not new. We had known for years that we had poor vehicles and a lack of body armour. Equipment was identified in 2001 to “not work well in hot and dusty conditions...The MoD had insufficient desert combat suits and desert boots for all personnel...Standard issue boots were unsuitable for the task; 4 Armoured Brigade’s post-exercise report cited melting boots and foot rot as ‘a major issue’.”

What do we do for those who lost loved ones? We make them wait 13 years for answers. How well do we look after the welfare of those who returned? Appallingly.

On Monday, we will vote to spend hundreds of billions of pounds on weapons of mass destruction while campaign veterans are sleeping rough in towns and cities across the UK. Many more are physically or psychologically damaged, left by us without the support network they require. When will we put in place a package for our service personnel that looks after their long-term welfare? When will we ensure that everyone leaving the armed forces does so with a qualification or skill that will stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives?

In truth, so many mistakes were made that 2.6 million words are probably not enough. I will finish with a quote from a father who lost a son—a quote that is intelligent, informed, and dignified. Roger Bacon, whose 34-year-old son Matthew was killed by a roadside bomb in Basra in 2005, said:

“Never again must so many mistakes be allowed to sacrifice British lives and lead to the destruction of a country for no positive end.

We were proud when our husbands, sons and daughters signed up to serve our country. But we cannot be proud of the way our government has treated them.

We must use this report to make sure that all parts of the Iraq War fiasco are never repeated again. Neither in a theatre of war, nor in the theatre of Whitehall.

We call on the British Government immediately to follow up Sir John’s findings to ensure that the political process by which our country decides to go to war is never again twisted and confused with no liability for such actions.”

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I put the Question, I thank colleagues for their stoicism and their succinctness. I would like particularly to thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his typical understanding and good grace. He was not heard today, by way of a speech, but he will be heard tomorrow, and of that he can rest assured.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(George Hollingbery.)

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

That the draft Telecommunications Restriction Orders (Custodial Institutions) (England and Wales) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 24 May, be approved.—(George Hollingbery.)

Question agreed to.

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

ATOMIC ENERGY AND RADIOACTIVE SUBSTANCES

That the draft Nuclear Industries Security (Amendment) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 26 May, be approved.—(George Hollingbery.)

The Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 20 July (Standing Order No. 41A).

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Tees Valley Combined Authority (Election of Mayor) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 13 June, be approved.—(George Hollingbery.)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Monday 18 July, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to the UK’s nuclear deterrent not later than 10.00pm; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(George Hollingbery.)
Tay Cities Deal

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

7 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): City deals have played a vital role in the economic revival of many urban areas throughout Scotland. Four city deal initiatives have so far been approved, and Dundee and the surrounding areas is the only major city region in Scotland yet to receive one. Draft plans have been submitted and the detail is under way. However, since the EU referendum, the Tay cities deal has been thrown into uncertainty, which is why I have called for this debate.

In August 2014, the Glasgow city region deal was the first Scottish city deal to be delivered, and it will be worth more than £1 billion over the next 20 years. Half of the funding for it was met by the Scottish Government. It has been followed by deals in both Aberdeen and Inverness, and 75% of the funding for the Aberdeen city deal was raised by the Scottish Government.

The 2016 Budget included an announcement that the UK Government would open negotiations with the Scottish Government for a further city deal for Edinburgh and south-east Scotland. Dundee and Perth are, therefore, the last major city regions awaiting approval.

Cities have been invited to see themselves as catalysts for regional development, and to construct proposals that are based not merely within their city boundary, but across their functional economic area, thereby providing a crucial boost to rural economies.

That brings me to my constituency. Dundee has, of course, taken the lead in co-ordinating an outline proposal for a city regional deal based on two cities—Dundee and the fair city of Perth—and the strategic towns of St Andrews in North East Fife and of Arbroath, Montrose and Forfar in Angus are diverse areas all linked by the River Tay. This is probably the largest population area in the UK mainland that is still awaiting a city deal. Our city region embraces a population of almost 500,000 and represents 10% of Scotland’s population.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): My hon. Friend mentioned a number of major cities in Scotland, but he neglected to mention Stirling, which also wants a city deal and faces similar uncertainty as a result of recent events. I hope that he will support Stirling, as well as the fair city of Dundee.

Chris Law: Absolutely. I apologise for not mentioning the wonderful city of Stirling. I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. I would love confirmation that Stirling will also be seriously considered for a future city deal.

The powerful collaboration is made up of four local authorities—the kingdom of Fife, the ancient seat of Angus, the fair city of Perth and Kinross, and Scotland’s sunniest city, Dundee—along with public agencies such as Scottish Enterprise, VisitScotland, Skills Development Scotland, the chambers of commerce, a wide cross-section of private sector businesses and the four universities in the Tay cities area.

The Tay cities economy is diverse, ranging from agriculture, forestry and public administration to high-tech engineering, life sciences research and development, tourism and, last but not least, the creative industries, in which video game production plays a huge part. It is also the headquarters or the major base of several of the leading 100 companies in the FTSE 100, including Scottish Southern Energy, GlaxoSmithKline, Diageo, Aviva and Stagecoach. The region is intersected by main road and rail transport corridors linking northern Scotland with the central belt and the rest of the UK. The Tay cities area, therefore, accounts for almost 7% of Scotland’s total economic output, and has enormous potential for growth.

The Tay cities partnership bid represents a balance between infrastructure, investment and a number of transformational and collaborative initiatives focused on the devolution of powers and budgets to create new employment opportunities. Connectivity is a central theme in the Tay cities proposal. The Tay cities region is at the heart of Scotland, and is strategically located between the central belt and Aberdeen and Inverness.

However, there is an issue of relative remoteness that needs to be addressed by significant investment in key road, rail and air connections with the rest of Scotland, the UK, Europe and beyond.

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): My hon. Friend will be aware that, in Angus, the Scottish Government are putting serious money into dealing with, for example, the problems with the rail line. The Tay cities deal, if it comes together, would be a huge economic boost for Angus, as well as for Dundee.

Chris Law: I concur with my hon. Friend. In fact, £200 million has been invested in the rail link between Dundee and Aberdeen. To add to that, the recent link by air to Amsterdam has been wholly welcomed, and is a major boost for the Tay cities region.

Digital connectivity is of equal importance to physical connections. Businesses now look to locate where they can receive a broadband service with the highest possible speeds and capacity. Dundee and Perth are both planning to invest heavily in their fibre networks and in related smart city technologies. To take a small example, of the last three businesses that I have been involved in, from tourism to film and media, and latterly, financial services, all were hugely dependent on broadband.

A successful Tay cities deal will play a vital part in ensuring the fulfilment of the massive potential of the skilled workforce of the Tay cities region. It is not so long ago, when I was growing up in the 1980s in Dundee, that the UK Government appeared hellbent on destroying manufacturing. Dundee paid a very high price for that. Owing to the destruction of jobs, industries and communities that took place in this period, Dundee still has a significant number of unemployed people or people in low-paid jobs. A similar pattern can be found in other towns and areas in the Tay cities region, and potential growth could be seriously held back by a lack of investment. In the Tay cities area, employment growth per year falls short of the Scottish average. Inequality is the single biggest challenge facing our region and, without a strategic approach, the gap between our wealthiest and poorest citizens will continue to grow.

However, the good news is that Dundee is now on the up. My city is a dynamic place and one of diversity, steeped in history, culture and industry. It boasts two universities, Dundee and Abertay; a fantastic art school,
the Duncan of Jordanstone; a further education college; and cultural landmarks such as the Dundee Repertory Theatre, the Gardyne Theatre and the Dundee Contemporary Arts centre. We have a world-renowned reputation for life sciences, and Ninewells is one of the largest teaching hospitals in Europe. My constituency is also an internationally renowned centre for video game development, which I have mentioned, and the birthplace of some of the biggest names in game history. Lastly, in 2014 we were recognised as the UK’s first UNESCO City of Design for our diverse contributions to the fields that I have mentioned.

This is all good, but Dundee is not resting on its laurels. We are in the midst of a £1 billion master plan to regenerate and reconnect the waterfront to the city centre. Of all the cities in the UK, Dundee was chosen to build the first Victoria and Albert Museum outside of London, which will open in 2018 and is expected to bring hundreds of thousands of new visitors each year to Dundee and the surrounding areas. The waterfront redevelopment has been a turning point for regeneration in Dundee, and a city deal would ensure that further progress was made in developing Dundee into a modern and important economic centre for Scotland. It is believed that the deal could have an impact on Dundee that is 10 times greater than the waterfront development currently under way.

The Scottish Government have a strong record of delivering for Dundee. We have received over £100 million through the cities growth fund, in conjunction with Scottish Enterprise, for our waterfront regeneration. As I mentioned, we are also set to benefit from a £200 million investment to improve rail links between Dundee and Aberdeen. By comparison, we have received £5 million so far from the UK Government. The Scottish Government are very supportive of city deals and have made it absolutely clear that they will work with any Scottish city considering a deal to make a strong, joint approach to the UK Government. I have touched on this already, but let us see a renewed commitment from the UK Government to seriously consider a more generous proportion of funding for the Tay cities deal.

It is not just Dundee that is seeking clarification on the city deal: North East Fife, the home of golf and of Scotland’s first seat of learning—the University of St Andrews, my alma mater, where I learned with great appreciation the history of my nation—seeks reassurances, as does the wider community. So too does the fair city of Perth—my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) is here tonight—where we find Scone Abbey, home of the Stone of Destiny where the king of the Scots was crowned. Last but not least, reassurance is needed for Angus, the birthplace of Scotland, where the signing of the declaration of Arbroath at Arbroath Abbey in 1320 marked Scotland’s establishment as an independent nation.

Mike Weir: Does my hon. Friend welcome the fact that only last week, UNESCO awarded the declaration of Arbroath “memory of the world” status in recognition of its importance in the development of democracy?

Chris Law: In a simple word, absolutely.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to talk about the Tay cities deal in such terms, because it takes in two great cities: the brand new city of Perth and the city of Dundee. The city deal must succeed because of its geographical spread, and I am sure that he will encourage the Minister to make sure that that happens.

Chris Law: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; what he has just said is important. Early discussions with Government officials and Ministers have been very positive, and those who are working on the Tay cities deal are working hard to assemble the detail of how it will make a difference to lives throughout our region. A full-time, dedicated city deal team, assembled from across the regions, is responsible for putting forward a clear and considered deal proposal to the Scottish and UK Governments to bring in at least £400 million of new investment.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheik (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech, as per normal. In terms of who will benefit from the deal, I know that he would not wish to miss out Perth and Kinross-shire. Will he take this opportunity to request that the UK Government come good on their promises of support and do not leave it all to the Scottish Government, as has happened previously?

Chris Law: I have to agree. It is important that a generous offer is made towards a Tay cities deal—which includes, of course, Perth and Kinross—in the very near future.

The team that has been put together is learning lessons from the city deals that have been developed so far, and as we know, a draft bid is already with the UK Government. By working in partnership, and by working better, faster and more effectively, we will build Dundee and the surrounding areas for the long term, future-proofing for generations to come.

However, it pains me to announce that the cities deal is in potential crisis. Just two months ago, I asked the Prime Minister in this Chamber during Prime Minister’s questions to give me a personal commitment to work with the Scottish Government to deliver funding for the Tay cities deal. The Prime Minister’s response was unequivocal: “I am very happy to give that commitment.”—[Official Report, 11 May 2016, Vol. 609, c. 624.] Where I come from, when someone gives their word, that means everything. In other words, Dundee is a radical town that does not mince its words.

However, as a result of this misguided EU referendum, which Scotland neither asked for nor wanted—a referendum with no plan whatsoever for the outcome, as a result of which we have seen the resignation of the previous Prime Minister and the arrival of a new one—there is huge uncertainty about many of the UK Government’s commitments, and we now hear doubts being expressed over the Tay cities deal. Following the EU referendum, the Secretary of State for Scotland caused alarm when he told our Tay city-wide paper, The Courier, that the new Chancellor could have “a different outlook” on the commitment. Let us hope that that is not the case.

Not only that, but, at the earliest opportunity on returning to Parliament after the vote, I asked the former Prime Minister again in this House to reaffirm his backing and he refused to give an unequivocal answer, stating: “I cannot bind the hands of my successor”.—[Official Report, 29 June 2016, Vol. 612, c. 320.]
To compound the confusion, I wrote to the Scotland Office to seek clarification, and the letter that I received only last Friday tells us it is “business as usual”. What are Dundee and the neighbouring communities supposed to believe? I am hoping that this evening the Minister will be able to give me an answer that is decisive, definitive and beyond any doubt, for the good people of Dundee and the surrounding areas.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I absolutely agree about the uncertainty that surrounds the Tay cities deal, and that applies to other city deals that are already in progress. My constituency is part of the Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city deal—and home to Newbattle Abbey, where the declaration of Arbroath was drafted—and we are very much looking forward to securing the funding that may come from the city deal. That uncertainty applies to a number of other deals as well.

Chris Law: That is an important point, and this is the key point on which we need clarification this evening. Not only Dundee, through the Tay cities deal, but cities such as Stirling and Edinburgh need an absolute cast-iron guarantee that the existing proposals will be fulfilled. It must be made clear that there are no doubts about them going forward.

The case for the Tay city deal is crystal clear. It is almost the last major region in Scotland yet to receive one, and I believe it would be a major injustice for that to be compromised on the grounds that the country now has a new Government with different priorities. At a time of economic uncertainty, the city deal programme is now more important than ever. I call on the Government to make a speedy affirmation of their support for this deal—and the others that have been mentioned tonight—so that many stakeholders can continue their crucial work on this vital project. The UK Government must provide an assurance that the outgoing Prime Minister’s commitment to the Tay city deal will be honoured.

Chris Law: That is indeed true and welcome, and the fact that that complete representation is here makes the case all the more powerfully. I want to send a positive message to those who wish to pursue this city deal. I want city deals to be delivered, and I believe they can help to grow local economies. Indeed, I have no doubt that those from the areas affected by such decisions know best how to drive economic growth and what is needed to unlock the undoubtedly significant potential, some of which the hon. Member for Dundee West has already alluded to. I want to find a way to unlock that growth, and to ensure that the UK Government play their part in doing that wherever possible.

In 2011 the UK Government created the city deals programme that sought to agree a series of bespoke, placed-based policy and funding deals with localities. In total, 26 English city deals were agreed between 2011 and 2014. Recognising the success of those deals, the Government have expanded that programme to other parts of the United Kingdom, working with the Government in Scotland and the devolved Administration in Wales. In 2014 the Glasgow and Clyde Valley city deal was agreed. That was followed by further city deals in Wales and the Cardiff capital region, in Scotland in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, and in Inverness and the Highlands in 2016. At the 2016 Budget, the Chancellor announced that the Government were opening city deal negotiations with Edinburgh and Swansea Bay, and hoped that those would be concluded positively.

UK city deals are driven at local level, and it is for local authorities and their partners to take the initiative in leading and proposing bids to the Scottish and the UK Governments. Where support from hon. Members is forthcoming, that is doubly welcome and effective in making the case, as the hon. Gentleman has done this evening. The Government are committed to ensuring that all parts of our country have the tools and support to grow their local economies. As such, Ministers in the Scotland Office are keen to engage with cities or regions that have proposals to improve economic performance, which includes four city deals.

City deals in Scotland are tripartite. They involve the UK Government, the Scottish Government, and the local area from which they are usually, and should expect to be, driven—I have already referred to the deals made since 2014. Building on the significant progress already made, both Governments have made it clear that they are receptive to the idea of a Tay city deal. However, in the first instance it is for those local leaders to come together and develop an ambitious and credible city deal proposal, and subsequently to put that to the UK and Scottish Governments.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The four local authorities involved have a draft bid, and all Members who represent Dundee, Perth and Kinross, and Angus are here tonight and backing this deal 100%.

James Wharton: That is indeed true and welcome, and the fact that that complete representation is here makes the case all the more powerfully. I want to send a positive message to those who wish to pursue this city deal. I want city deals to be delivered, and I believe they can help to grow local economies. Indeed, I have no doubt that those from the areas affected by such decisions know best how to drive economic growth and what is needed to unlock the undoubtedly significant potential, some of which the hon. Member for Dundee West has already alluded to. I want to find a way to unlock that growth, and to ensure that the UK Government play their part in doing that wherever possible.

On the deal we are here to discuss, I understand that my right hon. Friend Lord Dunlop met Dundee City Council and other potential business bid partners in Dundee on 16 May to discuss their ambitions. He also met the leaders of Perth and Kinross, at a meeting of the Scottish Cities Alliance, in Inverness on 8 June. The Government are encouraged by the ambition and early thinking contained in the city deal overview that
local leaders have shared. It is a relatively high-level proposal. There is still work to be done on it, but it is very welcome that it has come forward. It highlights opportunities around investment, innovation, inclusive growth and internationalisation. It highlights some of the things the hon. Gentleman has spoken about this evening: connectivity, the need for investment, and the opportunities that exist in that area to drive economic growth. They will benefit the UK as a whole, as well as the people living specifically in those communities.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland spoke with another bid partner, Dundee University, just last week. It is clear that partners are working hard and formulating ideas, but work still needs to be done. I recognise that the hon. Gentleman is seeking clarification and a commitment from the Government that we will continue with the process. I cannot put it any more clearly than this: I would like to see it successfully concluded. I would be happy—I know my colleagues in the Scotland Office would be enthusiastic, too—to work with hon. Members and local partners to see it delivered, if we can come up with the right proposal and the detail can be provided. If the figures stack up and the proposal works, it could be very good for the area the hon. Gentleman represents. Indeed, it would be good for the wider area represented in the House this evening and good for the UK.

The track record of city deals is a successful one. Significant local growth has been generated by listening to those who know what local economies need, and by recognising that different areas need different things and will want to focus on different priorities. They need support to do that effectively. The hon. Gentleman has made a very clear case. He and I have quite a different view on the UK’s membership of the EU, but we share a common interest in driving growth and empowering people to make the best of the wonderful opportunities that exist in the diverse country we are here to represent. I am very happy to give the hon. Gentleman assurances to that effect. I am very happy to continue, for as long as I am in this position, to support the city deals programme, and to work with him and his colleagues to deliver it.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Just a little update for the Minister, if Mr Speaker will indulge me: the Chancellor has just resigned. Will the Minister be able to shed any light on whether city deals will even still be on the table?

James Wharton: I am not sure if that was a hint from the hon. Lady that I should be checking my phone and ensuring it is fully charged. I do not know what might follow.

This is a time of change and we have a new Prime Minister. There will be a new Chancellor, whoever that may be. The track record of city deals is that they have been shown to deliver growth and boost local economies. They have been welcomed across the House and across the political divide for those very reasons. I have no doubt that whoever is appointed Chancellor in due course will want to drive growth and empower communities to unlock the potential that undoubtedly exists in them. I cannot speak for whoever that might be more directly than that, but I can assure the hon. Lady that I share the broad sense of direction put before the House in the debate this evening.

We all want to see local people empowered to make the best of the communities in which they live. We all welcome agreement about how that can be done, particularly when it is cross-party. City deals have been a successful programme, one to which this Government have been firmly committed. I want to see the programme taken forward and more done with it. I am happy to join the hon. Lady, and any hon. Member, in making that case in due course, but I cannot go further than that, as I am sure she will appreciate, because my phone has not yet rung this evening.

I want to end on a positive note. The hon. Member for Dundee West has made a strong case. My right hon. and hon. Friends in the Scotland Office will be keen to follow the debate that has taken place this evening. They are following this matter very closely. I hope the city deal can be delivered for the people he and his colleagues represent. I am convinced that in the future the city deals programme will be looked back on as something that helped to drive growth right across the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

7.24 pm

House adjourned.
The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): If you will allow me, Mr Speaker, may I take this opportunity to congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), the new Home Secretary, on her appointment, and also of course our new Prime Minister, the former Home Secretary? I wish them both great success. I also welcome the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) to his place; I think this is the first time we have had an exchange over the Dispatch Box. I wish the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) very good luck in their futures, too; I have enjoyed our exchanges.

Owing to our geology, deep geothermal power is likely to make a small contribution to electricity supply. However, Cornwall is one area where the technology can work and I am pleased that this is part of the devolution deal for Cornwall. Deep geothermal heat has greater potential and we are supporting its development through the renewable heat incentive and through feasibility studies funded by the heat network delivery unit.

Steve Double: I thank the Minister for that response. Deep geothermal has the great benefit of being a baseload energy source that is not reliant on variable weather conditions, and, as the Minister points out, Cornwall is one place where great potential for geothermal lies. As she is aware, a scheme is being developed at the Eden project in my constituency. May I invite her to visit Cornwall to see for herself the huge potential that there is for geothermal development there?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; nothing would please me more than a nice holiday in Cornwall right now. I am very pleased to hear that the EGS Energy and Eden project development is progressing well and, as he knows, it has the potential to produce power for about 4,000 homes and to make a very important contribution to the local community.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The truth is that the Ernst & Young renewable energy attractiveness index shows that the UK has fallen from the seventh most attractive country to invest in to the 13th. Following Brexit, that is only going to get worse, so what is the Minister doing to reverse that trend?

Andrea Leadsom: According to Bloomberg New Energy Finance the UK has been the fourth highest investor in clean energy globally for the past five years. Over half the total investment in the EU in 2015 occurred in the UK. We have a very proud record and we are set to exceed our own targets for generating renewable energy by 2020. That is a very proud achievement for this country.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Iceland has a fantastic football team, a free trade agreement of its own with China and is outside the EU. It is also the world’s leader in geothermal energy. Are we drawing on Iceland’s expertise to develop this industry in our own country?

Andrea Leadsom: If my hon. Friend is referring to the taskforce for the interconnector with Iceland, let me say that I am a huge fan of that, and there will be a statement shortly about the progress that he will be aware has been made between the leaders of the UK and Iceland. I seriously hope we will be able to make progress with all sorts of bilateral energy deals in the future.

Energy Infrastructure: Use of British Steel

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): Officials in my Department regularly meet developers to make clear the importance we place on sourcing UK content, including steel, in infrastructure projects. For example, EDF says it expects that a large proportion of the steel for fracking purposes. Does she agree it is very important that, wherever possible, we use British steel, not just because it supports the industry and the jobs it provides, but because the quality and safety of the product is far superior to that of foreign competitors?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I have had a number of meetings with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to discuss exactly this point. In its 2014 report “Getting ready for UK shale gas” Ernst & Young said there would be significant benefits for jobs and growth from a successful UK shale industry, including a projected need for over £2 billion-worth of steel.

15. [905864] Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): The Sustainable Product Engineering Centre for Innovative Functional Industrial Coatings—SPECIFIC—national innovation centre in Neath Port Talbot relies on EU
funding to use Tata British steel to develop buildings that are completely decarbonised. Such buildings lower household and business energy bills and help the UK to achieve its carbon reduction targets. Will the Minister support SPECIFIC in developing its use of British steel in its innovative projects, and replace any EU funds that might be lost as a result of Brexit?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My Department has been working closely with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to look at how we can help Port Talbot with its energy costs. We have already made announcements about how we are going to reduce the impact of carbon policies on the steelworks in Port Talbot, and we will continue to look at further ways of helping, including considering how energy-intensive industries across the board can reduce their electricity costs by changing the way in which they generate power.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that British steel can be used in energy infrastructure projects not just in the UK but around the world? Last week on a visit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo with the International Development Committee, we saw the way in which Britain is leading in helping to provide energy infrastructure in that country.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend is exactly right. A good example of my own efforts to improve the use of UK steel has been to urge the Offshore Wind Industry Council to do more to promote UK content. The UK is one of the biggest deployers of offshore wind to date and we can certainly hope that, once we start building our export markets, British steel will form a part of those exports.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The Minister will be aware that the two Liberty steel plants, including Clydebridge in my constituency, will be heavily involved in the supply of turbine casings for tidal lagoon projects and tubular steel structures for offshore wind turbines. The renewables industry can provide a huge market for steel produced in Britain, which represents a huge opportunity for British businesses. Will the Minister commit to revisiting the Government’s approach to the subsidy of such renewables?

**Andrea Leadsom:** On the subsidies for renewables, we have made it clear that we must balance the need to keep costs down for consumers with the need of new technologies to be subsidised in order to deploy and keep their costs down. On offshore wind, we have made it clear that we see huge potential for the cost trajectory to go down. The offshore wind industry already has a target of 50% UK content, and I am certainly encouraging it to be more ambitious. That would absolutely include the use of British steel.

**Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): Hinkley Point is expected to be one of the largest construction projects this country has ever seen, and it will require more than 200,000 tonnes of steel. Does my hon. Friend agree that this will provide a huge opportunity for the British steel industry?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Yes, and I would expand that to include opportunities for the supply chain right across the UK. The Government are working with the industry to develop a demand model that will provide a capability and capacity picture for the UK against the demand. Part of the aim is to identify the forward requirement for the components, which will include steel. We are working closely with new nuclear developers to create that supply chain right across UK businesses.

**Energy Market Competition**

3. **Oliver Colvile** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): What her policy is on the proposals of the Competition and Markets Authority on increasing competition in the energy market.

**The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom):** The Government welcome the Competition and Markets Authority’s final recommendations, which represent another step towards a competitive and effective energy market that works for all consumers, but it is key to understand that it is also the responsibility of energy suppliers to take action in response to the CMA’s recommendations, and we are meeting representatives of all the big six suppliers to urge them to do that.

**Oliver Colvile:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on answering all the questions this morning and wish her the very best of luck with anything that might happen later. Does she agree that it is only by having greater competition in the market that we can drive down prices, especially for those living in fuel poverty?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I invite any of my hon. Friends on the Front Bench to jump up and answer any of these questions, should they wish to do so, but I am quite used to being the last person on the battlefield; I know my place.

The Government have taken a great deal of action to boost competition and to make switching easier for all consumers, and we have absolutely recognised that vulnerable consumers need additional help to engage with the energy market. To help to address that, we have provided about £3 million over the last three years to fund face-to-face support through the Big Energy Saving Network as well as £1 million of funding for this winter and £1.5 million of funding for a programme administered by National Energy Action over the next two years. This is a top priority for my Department.

**Mr Speaker:** The Deputy Leader of the House has other important responsibilities and she knows that. As far as the men sitting on the Front Bench are concerned, they all look absolutely fine and are doing the right thing—simply nodding in the appropriate places.

**Dr Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her kind comments this morning. I, too, enjoyed our exchanges—and the chocolate peanuts.

The CMA’s final report has been characterised as blaming sticky customers for not switching and condoning penalties on them if they continue not to switch. Does the Minister agree with that analysis?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I also enjoyed the chocolate raisins.

The evidence is clear that customers on expensive standard tariffs could save £325 by switching to the cheapest fixed deal. I do not think that the CMA is blaming consumers; it is recognising a slight inertia or unwillingness to switch. We are trying to urge people to
switch. Between January and March this year, almost 2 million energy accounts were switched, over half of which moved to new suppliers, so the push to switch is actually getting through and we are seeing some progress.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on all that she has done to encourage competition, which helps consumers to get a price that is better for them. That is in stark contrast to Opposition Members who often scaremonger about capacity markets driving prices up and scare my constituents into worrying about whether they can pay their bills.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right. People all too often fail to recognise that the energy trilemma consists of keeping the lights on, keeping bills down, and decarbonising. He is right that the capacity market is there to ensure the security of supply and that is the payment we make to keep the lights on.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I echo the remarks made about the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd) and wish her well in her new role as Home Secretary. I am glad that the Minister is here, because if she had not been, these questions may have been a little more rhetorical than usual.

The previous Prime Minister said in 2012 that he would legislate to ensure that all consumers were on the lowest tariff. We have had four years since then, and an extensive CMA report has come up with recommendations that are a little underwhelming in their scope. Does the Minister think that that will be enough to ensure that energy customers get the best possible deal?

Andrea Leadsom: That was a fair question. The CMA has carried out a detailed piece of research and we are committed to implementing all its recommendations as soon as possible. We have also made it clear that if we do not see change, we will take further steps. The hon. Gentleman is right. We will implement the CMA’s recommendations. We will see costs come down, competition go up, and better remedies for people on prepayment meters, but we will also be alert to other opportunities to get costs down for consumers.

Callum McCaig: I am glad that the Minister says that the Government will remain vigilant on this matter. The CMA found that 70% of customers of the big six domestic suppliers were on the more expensive standard variable tariff. Will she set a target for reducing that so that we know what success looks like and to determine whether the further action that she mentions is required?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have just explained, we do not want to set a specific target. However, we are successfully providing support to organisations that then go on to help people to switch. I love the idea that if anybody listening to this really wants to help their grandparents, neighbour or whomever, who may not have the confidence to switch themselves, they could go and help them switch, possibly saving them several hundred pounds. Instead of setting targets and blaming people when they are not met, we need to persuade people of the advantages of switching.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd) and congratulate her on her appointment as Home Secretary. Under her charge, the Department of Energy and Climate Change played an important role in securing the Paris climate agreement, and she was a strong and enthusiastic champion for it. Only two weeks ago, some might have suspected that today she would be more likely to be standing at the Dispatch Box saying goodbye to me, but in this place we are beginning to learn to expect the unexpected. She was always courteous and often actually helpful in our exchanges, and we wish her well in her new role.

The CMA report states for the past five years the big energy companies have been overcharging customers by more than £4,657,000 every single day. Can the Minister name any other swindle of such enormous magnitude where the Government would simply say, “It is the customer’s fault. People should have shopped around and switched to another provider”?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question, but I completely refute the suggestion that the Government are saying it is the customer’s fault. We have been clear that we support the CMA’s recommendations; some huge changes are being undertaken. We are rolling out smart meters; simpler tariff rules are coming in; we will enable newer suppliers to pitch cheaper deals to inactive consumers; and there will be improved accuracy of quotes on price comparison websites. A range of remedies are being undertaken, and in no sense is there inaction on the part of this Government.

Barry Gardiner: The hon. Lady said that she was going to be meeting the industry and the big six. The Government’s own figures state that in England 2.38 million households are living in fuel poverty. Her Department could today take action to force—not to talk to, but to force—energy companies to pass on changes in wholesale prices immediately to customers through their tariff structures. In that way, customers would benefit directly from the drop in wholesale prices. Why is she failing to do this?

Andrea Leadsom: I am afraid that just shows that the hon. Gentleman does not really understand how the energy market works. His party’s proposal to cap energy bills to consumers was a grave mistake, because we have seen wholesale prices come down and all consumers have benefited from that. I say again that this Government are absolutely committed to getting bills down for consumers at every opportunity, to implementing the CMA’s significant reforms and to looking at what else is available to be done.

EU Referendum: Climate Change Commitments

4. Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the outcome of the EU referendum on the ability of the UK to meet its climate change commitments. [905851]

6. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the ability of the UK to meet its climate change obligations. [905854]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): The UK’s climate change commitments are grounded in the UK’s Climate...
Change Act 2008, which commits us to a reduction in emissions of 80% by 2050, from 1990 levels. Our membership of the EU has no impact on our commitment to this Act, as hon. Members will have seen in our decision to accept the Committee on Climate Change’s advice on the level of the fifth carbon budget just two weeks ago.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the Minister for her answer, but she will know that the Committee on Climate change has said that tackling climate change is going to be more difficult outside the EU. The vote to leave does not give the Government a mandate to undermine the global transition to clean energy, so will she confirm that the UK will maintain its commitment to meeting our 2020 clean energy target, which was agreed as part of the EU’s climate and energy package?

Andrea Leadsom: The UK is a world leader in tackling climate change. The 2008 Act is a UK Act that we are absolutely committed to. We are outperforming on our target on energy renewables by 2020, and we remain committed to that.

Mr Cunningham: What estimates has the Minister made of the impact there will be on energy costs in this country if we leave the EU?

Andrea Leadsom: In my view, leaving the EU will not make a difference to the innate cost of energy or the challenges for the energy sector. Most of our transactions for electricity generation are home-grown. There is a global market for gas. We have very good connections with European and non-European countries on interconnection, and we will continue to make commercial arrangements that are to the advantage of both the UK and those partners in energy.

Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her ability to do the work of four Ministers with such panache. She will know that normally economists disagree about everything, but one of the few things they are agreed about is that the best way to achieve an objective such as that set by the Climate Change Act 2008 is through a price mechanism. However, if subordinate targets are set, that inevitably means a less efficient and more costly route. When we leave the EU, will we therefore be able to scrap unnecessary targets while maintaining that final target, and thereby reduce the cost to consumers of reducing emissions by 80% by 2050?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is right to point out the importance of keeping costs down while we decarbonise. The Department has always made it clear that every opportunity to decarbonise at the lowest cost to consumers will be taken. It is my view that leaving the EU will enable us to do that to an even greater extent than we have in the past.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): Since 1990 the UK has decreased emissions by a third more than the EU average. We have now set a target for 2030 that implies a decrease of about double that which the EU put into the Paris INDCs—intended nationally determined contributions. Does the Minister agree that the real concern about Brexit might be that we will no longer be able to influence the EU to make more progress in decarbonisation?

Andrea Leadsom: I am entirely clear: European countries remain our friends and great allies, and we will continue to work with them. Leaving the European Union does not mean that we are suddenly leaving Europe in any sense, so it is my expectation and anticipation that we will remain closely aligned on global issues such as climate change, and that we will continue to play a leading role in the world’s attempts to tackle that great threat.

EU Referendum: Policy Implications

5. Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What assessment has she made of the potential policy implications for her Department of the UK leaving the EU. [905853]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): At the heart of our energy strategy is the need to encourage new investment in the UK’s energy system, so my Department will continue to take action to deliver secure, affordable and clean energy for hard-working families and businesses. This work is already under way. Since the referendum we have accepted the recommendations of the Committee on Climate Change for the level of carbon budget 5. We have published details of our upcoming capacity market auction and confirmed that our contracts for difference allocation round will go ahead later this year.

Kirsten Oswald: In fact, the UK Government’s failure to attract investment to the energy sector has already undermined energy security and sustainability for generations to come, and the Brexit vote has plunged the sector into further insecurity. What are the Minister’s plans to ensure the future of green energy following the leave vote?

Andrea Leadsom: I do not recognise at all what the hon. Lady says about our failure to attract international investment—that is clearly not the case. We are attracting a huge amount of investment in offshore wind. We have the successful turbine blade plant that is being created up in Humber by Siemens, we have DONG Energy, and we have various international developers that are putting in bids and building new offshore wind facilities in the UK. Onshore wind in the UK has been a huge success story. Some 99% of all our solar installations have taken place since 2010 and I have already cited statistics about our share of the investment going into renewables, so, I am sorry, but I do not recognise what the hon. Lady says.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on confounding the doom-mongers. Does she agree that COP 22 in Marrakesh in November will be a wonderful opportunity for the UK to showcase its world-beating edge in renewables technology and our industrial base?

Andrea Leadsom: I could not agree more: my hon. Friend is exactly right. The UK is leading on the deployment of renewables—we are getting down the cost of those technologies through our policies—and through our
commitment to decarbonisation and tackling climate change, and to showing the rest of the world how much we want to lead in this area, which we will continue to do.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Policy favouring small modular reactor technology offers affordable innovation in low-carbon energy, which is important in these days, as well as equally important manufacturing opportunities. Trawsfynydd in my constituency offers the ideal site for SMRs and, indeed, advanced reactor technology. Does not the Minister agree that the DECC process to select an SMR technology for generic design safety assessment should move forward with greater energy and a focus on a realistic shortlist of organisations?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, I agree that we need to move forward with this. The Government have recognised the potential of small modular reactors, and we have announced that we will invest at least £250 million over the next five years in an ambitious nuclear research and development programme that includes the competition the hon. Lady mentions. We have committed to publishing an SMR delivery road map in the autumn to clarify the UK’s plans for addressing the siting issues that she mentions, as well as regulatory approvals and, vitally, skills issues.

Energy Bills

7. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reduce energy bills for (a) businesses and (b) households.

8. Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reduce energy bills for (a) businesses and (b) households.

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): The best way to deliver lower energy bills for businesses and households is to have a robust and competitive energy market. There are now over 40 energy suppliers in the domestic retail energy market, which is up from 13 in 2010, and independent suppliers have over 17% of the dual fuel market. Competition is improving, but we are not complacent, and we look forward to implementing the recommendations from the Competition and Markets Authority’s final report on the issue.

Mark Pawsey: As a method of controlling its energy costs, CEMEX, which operates a large cement plant in my constituency, has adopted an alternative fuel, called Climafuel, which is derived from household waste and has the benefit of making use of material that would otherwise go to landfill. That is a great example of the circular economy. What steps can my hon. Friend take to encourage other energy-intensive industries to consider the use of alternative fuels?

Andrea Leadsom: I really welcome the initiative by CEMEX in my hon. Gentleman’s constituency. My Department is working closely with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, as well as with the energy-intensive industrial sectors, including the cement sector, on ways in which companies can reduce their emissions while maintaining their competitiveness, and the use of alternative fuels is an important part of that.

Michelle Donelan: What steps does the Minister plan to take to improve the effectiveness of the energy supply market to help small and large businesses to expand in Wiltshire and across the country?

Andrea Leadsom: The CMA has said that the energy sector for larger businesses is competitive, but it has put forward some strong and sound remedies for microbusinesses to prevent automatic roll-overs without a business’s consent and to improve online quotations, competition and the service available to microbusinesses.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): The Government have guaranteed an electricity price of about three times the wholesale price to EDF so that it will build a nuclear white elephant at Hinkley Point C. How on earth will that help consumers—businesses or households—to reduce their energy bills?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman knows that we get about 16% of our electricity every day from nuclear. He will also know that our nuclear plants are all due to be retired by at least the end of the 2020s. Therefore, new nuclear forms a core part of how we replace our electricity supplies. Hinkley is a good deal for consumers. Of course, the mark-to-market costs change according to the wholesale prices, but the price of the electricity coming out of Hinkley by the mid-2020s is guaranteed, and that is very important so that we provide certainty. The Government do not take the view that we will just see what happens; we have to plan for the future. Why? Because electricity security is not negotiable.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Northern Ireland households and businesses face the highest electricity bills in the whole United Kingdom. Businesses still face some of the highest energy costs in Europe. What discussions has the hon. Lady had with the Minister responsible for enterprise, trade and industry to ensure that everything is done to drive these costs down for Northern Ireland customers?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this issue. My Department and others frequently consult Northern Ireland Ministers to ensure that all the benefits that can be passed on to Northern Ireland consumers are being passed on. I welcome his contribution to the debate.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Barry Gardiner.

Barry Gardiner: The hon. Gentleman looks surprised. This could be a first—is this a question on which he does not wish to give the House the benefit of his views?

Mr Speaker: I am always happy to abide by your ruling, Mr Speaker.

One year ago, DECC’s estimate for the total lifetime cost of the nuclear power station at Hinkley Point C was £14 billion. Recently, that estimate was revised to £37 billion. Following the referendum vote, the Government’s expert adviser has said that Hinkley C is extremely unlikely to go ahead. Does this mean that the Minister now does not have to worry about justifying
the extra £23 billion cost to the Treasury, or does she just feel that she does not need to explain about the additional burden on taxpayers?

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

Andrea Leadsom: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman has misunderstood. The cost of the project has not changed. The difference is because of wholesale prices. As there is a fixed price agreed for consumers, when forecasts and current wholesale prices change, so will the difference between the fixed price and the wholesale price. To be clear, the cost of the project has not changed. It remains a good deal for consumers—[ Interruption. ] The hon. Gentleman is chuntering at me from a sedentary position, but let us be clear: we cannot just wait and see. We have to make investment decisions and stick by them. We cannot simply magic electricity out of thin air; we need to invest, make decisions, and be committed to them.

Smart Meters

9. Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What progress her Department has made on working with the major energy suppliers on the smart meter roll-out to ensure maximum benefit to consumers.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Smart metering will transform the experience of pre-payment customers. Topping up pre-payment meters should become as easy as topping up a mobile phone. I welcome the fact that a number of energy suppliers are already offering or trialling pay-as-you-go services for their customers.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I welcome the Secretary of State to her new post? She has done some very good work despite, as she knows, my disappointment with her views on Brexit. May I urge her to think again about smart metering being rolled out to every home in the country? May I also remind her that the research and innovation behind smart metering happened partly because of university co-operation across Europe? Contracts are already being withdrawn from British universities because of Brexit.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Gentleman, but I am not actually in a new post; I am in my old post. Secondly, I do not recognise any damage to our smart metering roll-out as a result of contracts not being awarded to universities. I have not seen any evidence of that. Thirdly, it is our continued plan that all households and businesses should be offered a smart meter by 2020.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm whether her Department is to be abolished? If so, who will take forward the work in progress on smart meters in Cabinet?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman will have to wait and see, but I can tell him that the commitment to our energy trilemma, smart meters and all our polices will remain as strong as ever.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Smart meters can reduce our energy usage, but there were 43,900 excess winter deaths last year and a “Panorama” investigation revealed that more than 9,000 of them were directly related to living in cold and poorly insulated homes. Will the Minister explain why there has been an 80% drop in the installation of major energy efficiency measures in British homes over the past four years, and will she agree to have urgent talks with Lord Adonis to ensure that energy efficiency is a top priority for the National Infrastructure Commission?

Andrea Leadsom: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that fuel poverty in this country has to be tackled, and that is an absolute priority for my Department. He may be aware that we have launched our consultation on the energy company obligation to ensure that we refocus it on the fuel-poor and do everything we can to ensure warmer homes.

Retail Energy Market: Switching

10. Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): What assessment she has made of recent trends in the rate of switching in the retail energy market.
The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that switching was at a four-year high in 2015, with 6.1 million electricity and gas switches across the UK. That is an increase of about 15% since 2014. Some 2 million further gas and electricity switches have already taken place between January and March of this year, with 52% of those customers moving to newer suppliers.

Mims Davies: Will the Minister confirm that the Government are specifically ensuring that those who are in most need or who are financially challenged, including those in my constituency and across the UK who are in need of lower energy bills, are benefiting from an efficient and easier switching regime?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes. I can assure my hon. Friend that the Government are acting to do just that. In fact, customers on expensive standard tariffs could save £325 by switching to the cheapest fixed deal, which is why we continue to encourage customers to switch through our big energy saving network initiative.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): When trying to compare tariffs, most of them remain incomprehensible, which particularly affects my most vulnerable constituents, including the elderly, the disabled and those with mental health issues. What measures will the Minister take specifically to support the most vulnerable?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is exactly right that this is a very important area. I reiterate that over the past three years the big energy saving network has reached about 350,000 vulnerable consumers, helping them to reduce their bills by switching. Last year we ran a successful national TV and press advertising campaign, Power to Switch, and more than £38 million was saved by 130,000 households switching energy supplier. We continue to support good organisations such as Citizens Advice, which often hosts such initiatives and works face to face with vulnerable consumers to help them with the process of switching. I urge people who are struggling with fuel bills to give it a try; it really is not too difficult.

Low-carbon Economy


12. Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect of the outcome of the EU referendum on investor confidence in the UK power sector.

13. Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the Government's decision on the level of the fifth carbon budget on investment in the low-carbon economy.

14. Andrea Leadsom: As my hon. Friend would expect, we are already busy working on that plan with other Departments, businesses, consumers and civil society. For example, we are already in discussion with the CBI, the Aldersgate Group and Energy UK among others to arrange specific stakeholder events, ensuring that our emissions reduction plan is built from the ground up, with input from a range of stakeholders.

Mark Menzies: Westinghouse nuclear fuels is the second largest employer in Fylde and produces nuclear fuel for 15% of the UK's electricity production. What assurances can the Minister give that this Government will continue to support the UK's domestic nuclear fuel industry and take us to a low-carbon future?

Andrea Leadsom: Nuclear power is a vital part of our work to build a secure, affordable and clean energy system to keep the lights on in the decades ahead. The Westinghouse facility in my hon. Friend's constituency has a crucial role to play, providing the fuel that powers our nuclear fleet, as well as employment to many in his constituency.

EU Referendum: Investment in Power Sector

15. Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the outcome of the EU referendum on levels of overseas investment in the UK energy sector.

20. Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the outcome of the EU referendum on levels of overseas investment in the UK energy sector.

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): The Government have engaged extensively with investors since the EU referendum, sending a clear message that the UK remains open for investment and business. I am very clear that the UK is an attractive environment for investment in energy. My Department will continue to take the steps needed to deliver secure, affordable and clean energy for families and businesses across the UK.

Mary Creagh: As one former leadership contender to another, I commiserate with the Minister over the events of the past week and wish her well in the reshuffle today.

The manufacturers organisation the EEF told the Environmental Audit Committee, which I chair, that the decision to cancel the carbon capture and storage competition in the autumn statement came as a huge shock and damaged investor confidence in the industry. We also heard from Siemens, which has invested £160 million
in the wind industry in Yorkshire, that the referendum result means it is facing a whole new set of unanswered questions. What steps is the Minister taking to bring confidence to investors in low-carbon industries?

Andrea Leadsom: In fact Siemens has recommitted to its investment in Hull, which is great news for that area. I had a meeting a few days ago—it seems like a year ago—with the Offshore Wind Industry Council to talk about confidence in investment. Its members all remain committed to the UK, and EDF has reaffirmed its commitment to the UK.

Specifically on CCS, as I have said many times in this Chamber, we remain committed to looking at what our future strategy for CCS will be. The fact that the competition did not make the cut in terms of taxpayer value for money at the last spending round does not mean that we are ruling out CCS. We believe that it continues to play an important role in the future of our decarbonisation strategy.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: The recent EU referendum result has of course created widespread insecurity in this market and, indeed, the wider economy. There is now an increasing number of possible options from the Brexit negotiations, each leading to a number of regulatory and market options for the UK’s relationship with the EU, with each of these having differing implications for the investment in and trade of energy. What steps has the Department already taken to guarantee that overseas investment in our energy sector is protected, whichever of the outcomes is taken?

Andrea Leadsom: I believe that we will see huge opportunities in leaving the European Union. As is always the case in the United Kingdom, we will take great steps to ensure business confidence and ensure that those who have invested in this country will be able to use our very sound contract law and investor base to be able to continue to fruition with their projects.

Deidre Brock: I am sure the Minister will agree that the EU exit vote has caused uncertainty. I am sure that this new and slightly unexpected Government, with the paint still drying on the signs, will want to boost investment and development in the energy sector. Will the Minister tell us how the Government will create incentives for investment and boost consumer confidence?

Andrea Leadsom: I think the hon. Lady will accept that my concern about investor confidence led to a very significant move on my own part to make sure that we had certainty in the UK. The new Government will absolutely be keen to reassure investors and to make sure that this remains a very strong place to invest.

Energy Tariffs

14. Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that energy consumers are on the best value energy tariffs. [905863]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): The most effective way for energy consumers to make sure that they are on the best value tariff is to shop around. I encourage all consumers to engage in the market and to make use of the Ofgem-approved price comparison websites that are readily available. We have taken action to make it simpler and quicker to switch supplier, and we are working with Ofgem to move to reliable next-day switching.

Ben Howlett: I thank the Minister for that response. Many people remain unaware of how easy it is to switch energy providers and save money. What actions is her Department taking to encourage people to look into switching providers?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to say that we need to make sure that people are aware not just of the benefits of switching, but of how easy it is to do. We are taking steps to raise awareness through the big energy saving network, Big Energy Saving Week and the Power to Switch campaign. We are also working to improve the switching process for customers. We launched the energy switch guarantee last month to give consumers confidence to switch, and we are working with Ofgem to deliver next-day switching.

Security of Electricity Supply

17. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure security of electricity supply in winter 2016-17 and in future years. [905867]

19. Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure security of electricity supply in winter 2016-17 and in future years. [905869]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): Our top priority is to make sure that families and businesses have secure energy supplies, and therefore to ensure that National Grid has the right tools in place to manage the system. Our energy security has been strengthened by reforms of the capacity market, including holding an auction this coming winter for delivery in 2017-18.

Sir David Amess: As the promoter of the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act 2000, I am very interested in energy supplies in winter. Will my hon. Friend do all she can to encourage investment in new gas generation?

Andrea Leadsom: The capacity market is the most cost-effective way to make sure we have the infrastructure to cope with unexpected demand peaks. In May, we committed to buying more capacity and buying it sooner. New build capacity is eligible for 15-year agreements, providing a secure revenue stream and thereby encouraging new gas infrastructure.

Richard Graham: Yesterday I launched a new all-party parliamentary group for marine energy, to promote the fantastic potential from our tumultuous seas of energy, whether tidal, stream or wave. Does my hon. Friend agree that when the Hendry review comes out in November this year, the Government should respond as fast and as positively as possible to make us a world leader in what could be one of the great sources of energy in the world?

Andrea Leadsom: We certainly recognise the potential that tidal lagoons could bring to the UK, which is why we have commissioned this independent review. We are
Mr Speaker: Finally, Antoinette Sandbach.

Shale Gas

22. Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that protected areas remain protected from the development of shale gas.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful for the Minister’s response. Petroleum exploration and development licences have been granted in areas with green-belt and nature conservation status in my constituency. Can she reassure me that her recent announcement about protection from surface drilling will extend to the green belt and sites of special scientific interest?

Andrea Leadsom: I can reassure my hon. Friend that the planning process will take into account all issues related to sensitive areas. I can also tell her that fracking will not be permitted from wells drilled at the surface of areas such as national parks, the broads, areas of outstanding natural beauty, world heritage sites, sites of special scientific interest, Ramsar sites and Natura 2000 sites.

Topical Questions

T1. Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): As things stand, I am delighted that the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) and I are able to take forward the enormous job of the Department of Energy and Climate Change. I am quite sure that there will be further announcements later that we all look forward to hearing.

Mims Davies: Worryingly, my constituency is very polluted in parts of Botley and central Eastleigh. What progress is being made to ensure that all cars imported to this country meet our rigorous emissions standards?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely assure my hon. Friend that the Department for Transport is looking closely at transport and vehicle emissions. Further measures will be brought forward this autumn on meeting the increasingly stringent emissions requirements.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Some 23,000 businesses in the UK have solar panels on their roofs. If proposals in the current review of business rates go ahead, instead of paying £8 per kW, those companies could end up paying between £43 and £61 from next April. Up until last week, the Minister’s Department did not even know about that. Will she find out why her officials have been sleeping on the job, and speak to Ministers in the Department for Communities and Local Government to get this mess sorted out?

Andrea Leadsom: I am not aware of any sleeping on the job. If the hon. Gentleman wishes me to liaise with DCLG I will look into that, but we are certainly not asleep on the job.

T2. Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): I have never known my hon. Friend to sleep on the job and I wish her well in the reshuffle.

On the north side of the River Mersey, Fiddlers Ferry power station has closed down, while on the south side we have the blight of the new wind farm being built. Will my hon. Friend reassure my constituents in Frodsham and Helsby that the scientifically significant Frodsham marshes will not be blighted if fracking goes ahead?

Andrea Leadsom: We have more than 50 years of drilling experience in the UK, as well as one of the best records in the world for economic development alongside protection of the environment. All onshore oil and gas projects, including shale gas, are subject to the planning system, which addresses impacts such as traffic movements, noise, working hours and so on. National planning guidance states that any new development must be appropriate for its location and must take into account effects on health, the natural environment and general amenity, as well as any adverse effects from pollution. I hope that I can reassure my hon. Friend that his constituency will be protected.

T4. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): The Swansea Bay tidal lagoon project is hugely important not just to Swansea and south Wales but for potentially similar projects in Newport. When will the Minister have news of the independent report, and what is the timetable for making the decision?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that Charles Hendry was appointed to look into the whole case for tidal lagoons and the contribution they could make to our future energy security, but also, importantly, the cost trajectory. His report will come out later this year. I cannot put a specific time on that, but we are acting just as fast as we possibly can.
Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that scrapping the Department of Energy and Climate Change could only be taken as a signal that the new Government attach less significance to these important issues?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. The assumption that we have to have a Department for something in order to meet objectives on it is not one I agree with at all.

T5. [905877] Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I have just been sent a report from Southend-on-Sea citizens advice bureau calling for a fair deal for prepayment meter users, who seem to be getting a second-class service. Given that they are the most vulnerable people, will my hon. Friend see to it that her Department looks again at the system?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree that prepayment meter customers get a rough deal, with a far smaller choice of tariffs and suppliers than customers who pay by other methods. That is why we are supporting recommendations by the Competition and Markets Authority to make it easier for prepayment meter customers to switch supplier, and to introduce a safeguard tariff cap for those customers until competition in that segment of the market significantly improves.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): May I too wish the hon. Lady well in the reshuffle? We worked closely together on early intervention policy, and I know how committed she is to that. My constituent Margaret Graham recently attended my surgery. She was at her wits’ end over protracted dealings with her energy supplier, npower, which has continually failed her since it made a huge error resulting in a very large overpayment. Since my intervention it has apologised and offered £150 in compensation, but this has been going on since 2013. Can the Minister assure me and the House that energy companies will treat their customers fairly and with respect, and does she agree that they should be held fully to account for their failings?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with the hon. Lady—she is exactly right. Energy suppliers must behave and sell their services abroad as a result of breaking the shackles of the EU. Will she explain why the Swedish firm Vattenfall is reviewing its investment in the UK, which will put £5.5 billion of investment in offshore wind at risk?

Andrea Leadsom: I made it clear that continued, enormous investment is coming to the UK from offshore and onshore investors. I am not aware of the hon. Lady’s particular point, but the UK remains an attractive place to invest. The Government are doing everything they can to ensure that we get even more overseas investment in our energy infrastructure.

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure the effectiveness of the capacity mechanism in bringing forward new gas-fired power stations such as that at the Carrington site?

Andrea Leadsom: The capacity market is incredibly important for ensuring secure energy supplies. We recently announced that we will bring forward an earlier auction for 2017-18, to secure more capacity. We hope that that will enable us to get over this short-term issue where wholesale prices are so low that the viability of power stations is at risk. By having that capacity mechanism firmly embedded in our energy supply, we believe that we will bring forward new, attractive gas investment through longer-term contracts that will benefit the UK energy consumer.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): The Government have estimated that the capacity auction this winter could put £36 on customer bills. Given that today the Minister has talked about keeping down customer bills, how does she think that that auction will affect those bills?

Andrea Leadsom: Our central assessment is that the impact on bills could be up to £28, but our impact assessment also shows that if we did nothing, further power station closures could add a further £46 to consumer bills. We believe that this auction is good value for consumers, and it provides the energy security on which we all rely.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What opportunities does my hon. Friend see for both inward investment and selling our services abroad as a result of breaking free of the shackles of the EU?

Andrea Leadsom: I personally believe there will be huge opportunities. We now have the chance to negotiate free trade deals with the rest of the world. We have the opportunity to determine policies for energy without the need to constantly look for EU state aid. The opportunities for the future are enormous, and I look forward to being able to promote UK plc in the world.
Business of the House

10.35 am

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling): The business for next week is as follows:

Monday 18 July—Debate on a motion relating to the UK’s nuclear deterrent.

Tuesday 19 July—Second Reading of the Higher Education and Research Bill.

Wednesday 20 July—Opposition day (6th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition Motion. Subject to be announced.

Thursday 21 July—Debate on a motion relating to a ban on manufacture, sale, possession and use of snares, followed by general debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment. Both subjects were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 22 July—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 5 September will include:

Monday 5 September—Remaining stages of the Finance Bill (day 1).

Paul Flynn: When can we have a debate on recidivism? This problem has not been reduced by any Government in the past 43 years. The cycle of repeated offending goes on and on, and it is now afflicting politics.

Yesterday’s Prime Minister committed political suicide by giving into his party and ordering a referendum that guaranteed the destruction of his premiership. Are we seeing the same thing repeated today? The hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) might have made a perfectly adequate Minister for the import of second-hand water cannon, but he is now the Foreign Secretary—especially for his services to Europhobia. He has been sacked twice from previous jobs for not telling the truth; he has insulted the President of the United States; and he has attacked people from all parts of the world from Liverpool to Papua New Guinea. Do these qualities mean he will be supreme in an area where the qualities of diplomacy and truthfulness are in demand?

The right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) is returning to the Government without any explanation of why he was disgraced and sacked from his previous appointment. At the time, Sir Philip Mawer was the independent adviser on ministerial conduct. He said that the right hon. Gentleman should have been investigated for what happened at the Ministry of Defence. The Prime Minister refused to refer the case to the adviser and Sir Philip resigned. The right hon. Member for North Somerset received absolution by resignation. What this means—is this a matter of concern for the Leader of the House, because it is his responsibility—is that the return of the right hon. Member for North Somerset to the Cabinet is a degradation of the probity of this House and the advances made by the previous Government. A Government are being created not in the best interests of the country but to deal with the perpetual internal war in the Conservative party between Europhilic and Europhobes.

Chilcot has given its verdict. It is a thunderous verdict of guilty not just for one man but for this House, the previous Government, the Opposition and three Select Committees. We are guilty, and are judged guilty, of commanding our valiant troops to fight a vain, avoidable war, and the Leader of the House is uniquely qualified and responsible for answering the charge.

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has apologised on behalf of the Labour party: 179 of our gallant British soldiers died; their loved ones have a wound of grief that will never heal; 3,000 have been maimed in body and mind; uncounted Iraqis were killed, made homeless or exiled; the cycle of terrorism continues to this day—and all because of an act of folly, incompetence and vanity by this House. Will the Leader of the House take responsibility—it is his job—and arrange a formal apology, preferably face to face with the bereaved and surviving injured? This is the least a grateful nation can do for those we have grievously wronged.

Chris Grayling: I will come back to the last point in a moment, but I should start with congratulations; we are both still here; the hon. Gentleman is on his third week in the job. He has not yet acquired a new job, but with changes in the structure of Departments, perhaps he will have the opportunity of a third one—shadow International Trade Secretary—to go with his existing portfolio. If Labour party Front Benchers were a football team, they would have him in goal, him in defence, him in attack, lots of people on the left wing, nobody willing to play on the right and endless own goals.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the Foreign Secretary. I will take no lessons from a party that has the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) as its shadow Foreign Secretary. We have on those Benches a party that is not fit to be an Opposition, let alone an alternative Government. Over the past few months, we have heard from people now holding senior positions on the Opposition Benches views that undermine our armed forces and defences and are wholly unaligned with the national interest.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned matters of propriety. I simply remind him—he has raised this at business questions before from the Back Benches—that if he has complaints about any Member, there are channels available by which he can pursue them. But he has not done so. He also talked about internal war. This week of all weeks, a Labour politician talks of internal war in another political party. Labour Members have been trying again and again to get rid of their leader, but they just cannot do it. He is on the ballot paper and will probably win again, and they will be resigning all year. It is a complete shambles and Labour is a complete disgrace to this country politically. I will take no lessons from the Opposition about internal wars within a political party.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Chilcot and says it is just that the Government did not moralise any more. All the additional time which he has been given and which he has not used to explain himself is a complete waste of money and a complete waste of time. He has not changed his views, he has not said he is learning, he has not said that he has changed, and he is just repeating and repeating and repeating. He has not changed his views, he has not said he is learning, he has not said that he has changed, and he is just repeating and repeating and repeating.

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Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last weekend, I and Members from across the House attended a rally for the National Council of Resistance of Iran...
Unfortunately, we had to go to Paris to meet those good people and their brave leader, Maryam Rajavi. Why can we not invite the leader of the resistance to this country, so that we might help free Iran from the shackles of the mullahs?

Chris Grayling: I know that my hon. Friend believes passionately in this cause, and I am sure that the Foreign Secretary will have heard his comments and will want to give them careful thought.

May I take this opportunity to thank my hon. Friend, in his capacity as deputy Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, and the Chairman, who is also here, for returning to the tradition of a pre-recess Adjournment debate? It is something that the House values, and I am glad that they have done it.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week’s business. In the night and morning of the long silver spoons, the nation was glued to the television. “What would Grayling get?” was the question that perplexed the nation—the man who designed and fashioned the new Prime Minister’s leadership coronation would surely get a top job, but he is back here with us this morning, and the nation can only breathe a collective sigh of relief.

We had thought that the new Prime Minister did not have a sense of humour, but she has proved us totally wrong on that one by appointing the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) as the Foreign Secretary. We could almost have heard the guffaws of laughter from Parliaments and ambassadors last night as news got around that “Boris” was in charge of the UK’s foreign policy—and he is in charge of MI6, too. Perhaps the Leader of the House will tell us a little about how this new restructured Government are going to work. When will we see the new diet of departmental questions and how this is all going to come together?

Is it not ironic that the first motion that the new Prime Minister will put before this House on Monday is for a new generation of weapons of mass destruction? That will be resolutely opposed by my hon. Friends and me, and we hope that the Labour party will join us in opposing it. When this country is facing the disaster of Brexit and further austerity, in what world is it right to spend billions and billions of pounds on new nuclear weapons and nuclear re-armament?

Lastly, we are not even sure whether the Labour party has enough personnel resources to fill the places in all the new Departments that will be created. I have asked you this question already, Mr Speaker, but at what point do they fail to meet their obligations as the official Opposition as clearly set out in “Erskine May”? Can we have a debate about what is expected from Oppositions? Perhaps the Leader of the House will support a rearrangement of the furniture, so that this Government and he can experience some real opposition in this House.

Chris Grayling: I was slightly surprised to hear the hon. Gentleman talk about the role of the Leader of the House as not being a top job; of course, he has the Scottish National party equivalent of that job, so I take it that he is, in fact, a junior member of his Front-Bench team.

On departmental questions, the hon. Gentleman knows that the Government are in the middle of a process of restructuring. We will make further information available shortly, and the House authorities will set out plans for a revised schedule for parliamentary questions. That is inevitable, and it will be in place for the start of the September sittings. As it stands, next week has a fairly routine collection of oral questions and I do not think there is any need for change there.

On Trident, the hon. Gentleman and his party have been very clear about their views. I am delighted to say that a large number of Labour Members will support us on Monday, and I am grateful to them for their support. What puzzles me is this: the SNP is vigorously opposed to Trident, but are SNP Members actually arguing that the Rosyth facility should be transferred south of the border? Are they suggesting that? Are they suggesting that the facilities in Scotland that provide jobs for people in Scotland should be transferred south of the border? [Interruption.] Are they or are they not suggesting that? I suspect that a lot of people who work in the nuclear sector in Scotland and who support those submarines would be deeply distressed if their jobs disappeared.

The Labour Front Bench is an issue on which the hon. Gentleman and I can clearly agree. It is an extraordinary situation to see multi-tasking and to see people who resigned from the Labour Front Bench 26 years ago making a comeback, as the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) has done. It will be fascinating to see over the next few weeks whether they will be able to get their act back together again or whether this shambles is going to continue for month after month.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): One of the reasons why many people voted for Brexit was that they believed it would provide this country and our communities with more opportunity to shape their own futures. May we have a debate, in turn, on a regional strategy for transport infrastructure to sit alongside other provisions such as health and education, so that any additional housing can be sustainable?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend has made a similar point before, and I know she feels strongly about the devolution of powers to the regions. I am absolutely certain that, as we leave the European Union, there will be more opportunity for that to take place. Ironically, I suspect there will be more powers heading for Scotland, as well as for Wales and Northern Ireland. The point that she makes is a good one. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will be in his place to answer questions on Monday, and my hon. Friend might like to bring the subject to the Floor of the House through an Adjournment debate.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing in for me over the last two weeks. Two weeks ago, I visited the Somme, which ironically seemed like a place of real tranquillity in comparison with this place recently. Last week, we saw the opening of the A1 road-widening
scheme in Gateshead, which has brought immense calm to the town centre as a result of displacing traffic. We are very grateful for that.

Will the Leader of the House please confirm that Thursday 8 September will be available for Back-Bench business? If business is to be tabled for that day, we shall need to consider it and table it next Tuesday, but without confirmation of the date, we shall not be able to do so.

**Chris Grayling:** Let me begin by welcoming the hon. Gentleman back to the Chamber. We have missed him over the last couple of weeks.

I am delighted to hear about the opening of the widened A1. There is something that I find very encouraging nowadays. Ten years ago, when I was shadow Transport Secretary, I travelled the country visiting marginal seats and other areas where industrial development was taking place but essential transport projects were not. Now, I am delighted to discover that such projects are being developed wherever I go, and the widened A1 is one of them. It will bring real bonuses to the north-east, and it is a sign that we care about areas—including the north-east—that are really important to the country.

As for that date in September, I will have a look at it. We have planned business only up to the day on which the House returns after the recess, but I will give careful thought to whether we can accommodate the hon. Gentleman in this regard.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Will the Leader of the House arrange for whoever happens to be the Minister responsible—I think it unlikely to be me—to make a statement about the status and protection of the green belt? My constituents in Burley in Wharfedale are facing a planning application for the building of 500 houses on the green belt in that village, and my constituents in Baildon are facing similar proposals. Surely, the whole point of the green belt is that it should be immune from house building. My constituents do not trust Bradford Council to look after their interests, and look to the Government to ensure that they are properly protected.

**Chris Grayling:** I am sorry that my hon. Friend is so pessimistic about his prospects in the reshuffle. I think we would all value his contributions were he to appear at this Dispatch Box.

Questions to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will take place on Monday, and my hon. Friend will then have an opportunity to raise an issue that I know is important to him and his constituents. As ever, he is a powerful advocate for Yorkshire and will continue to be so, even if it is still from the Back Benches.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Has the Leader of the House received a request from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills for him to provide Government time for a debate on the fantastic contribution that the leisure industries make to the UK economy? Such a debate would allow Ministers to tell us how UK manufacturers will fulfil demand for major new infrastructure: a transcontinental network of zip wires to enable our new Foreign Secretary to travel around the world cheaply, with low environmental impact, and in the style to which he is accustomed.

**Chris Grayling:** It is an interesting idea, but I think we will probably be investing in infrastructure that is more used to cars, trains and buses.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): The outgoing Chancellor was a great proponent of the northern powerhouse, and policies connected with that initiative are vital to constituencies such as mine. May we have an early debate on how new Ministers will develop the northern powerhouse concept?

**Chris Grayling:** The new Chancellor will take questions in the House on Tuesday, but I can also say that there is no question of a change in our focus on supporting the development of the northern part of the country, and encouraging economic growth and new investment. That will remain a priority for the new Government, and we are committed to a continuation of the progress that we have already made.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): One of my constituents is currently detained at Yarl’s Wood. She is suffering ill health, and does not feel that her health concerns are being addressed. There is evidence to corroborate that. According to a recent report from the National Audit Office, 35% of recommendations from the chief inspector of prisons have yet to be implemented. Will the current Leader of the House offer an urgent debate on the issue?

**Chris Grayling:** I do not know about the individual constituency case, but I am sure that the hon. Lady will raise it with the new Home Secretary. Of course there are lessons to be learnt from the inspections that are carried out in institutions such as Yarl’s Wood. It continues to be a priority for the Government to ensure that we detain people decently, but also to ensure that we detain people when there is a serious question mark over their right to be in the country, and I think that that is right and proper.

**Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): Last night, GHA Coaches—which is in the constituency of Wrexham but has two depots in my constituency, in Tarvin and Winsford—went into administration, with the potential loss of 300 to 400 jobs. I should be grateful if the Leader of the House encouraged the new Secretary of State for Wales to liaise with the Department for Transport, and indeed with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, to establish what support can be given to those who may be facing redundancy.

**Chris Grayling:** I am very sorry to hear of what must be very difficult and distressing news for my hon. Friend’s constituents and those in the next-door constituency of Wrexham, and all our good wishes in this House go out to those affected. When a business is put into administration, one always hopes that it is possible to save it. I know that the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Wales Office will do everything they can to provide appropriate support, where they are able to do so.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Life in Iraq: imagine your phone rings and the question is, “Are you a Christian?” and the answer is, “Yes, I believe in Jesus.” The second question is, “Are you in the police?” and the answer is,
“Yes, I am,” and then you are told that you must leave or die. This is what happened to Franco Said, a policeman in Baghdad, and his family. They fled to Irbil in northern Iraq the very next day. No one is safe from Daesh in Iraq. Murdering the Christian faith in Iraq is truly a reality for many. Will the Leader of the House agree to there being a statement on this matter as soon as possible?

Chris Grayling: I have every sympathy with the issue that the hon. Gentleman raises. The tragedy is that parts of the middle east used to be beacons of stability, with religions standing side by side, having done so for hundreds of years. The persecution that has taken place of Christian populations, typically by extremists, is absolutely unacceptable and a tragedy. I know the hon. Gentleman’s comments will have been listened to by the new Foreign Secretary. We as a Government continue to do everything we can to encourage an end to this kind of persecution, but of course we face extraordinarily difficult security situations there. We will carry on doing our best.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The Government are preparing to negotiate Brexit, which will rightly secure the future of EU nationals in the UK and UK citizens living abroad. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is a fine opportunity to settle the issue of the lettori, foreign nationals working in Italian universities who have been discriminated against in their pay and working conditions for decades, despite several EU judgments against the Italian Government? May we have a statement from the Government to say that the issue of the lettori will be dealt with during the Brexit renegotiations? I would be very satisfying, on leaving the EU, to resolve an issue that we are completely unable to deal with while we are in the EU.

Chris Grayling: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has campaigned on this issue for a long time; he has raised it with me before at business questions. The Foreign Office continues to put pressure on the Italian Government over this. Our ambassador in Rome has made representations recently about it, and will continue to do so. It is, and should remain, unacceptable for discrimination of this kind to take place in any civilised country.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Last week, this House debated claims by the Vote Leave campaign that an extra £350 million a week would be available for the NHS if we voted to leave the EU. The problem with that debate was that none of the Members who made those claims attended the House to answer for their claims, so may we have that debate again, please, only this time will the Members associated with that claim attend and answer for their actions?

Chris Grayling: It is the job of the Government to respond in this House. Those who stand at this Dispatch Box speak for the Government, not for campaigns for either side in the referendum debate.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): In the light of growing concerns about the increase in childhood obesity, may we have a ministerial statement on what the Government are doing to tackle the problem, and will the Leader of the House confirm whether that will include bringing forward a childhood obesity strategy?

Chris Grayling: I can confirm that work has been taking place in the Department of Health on such a strategy. Of course, I hope that the decision we took to introduce a sugar tax in the Budget will help improve the situation with childhood obesity.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): I am delighted that the Leader of the House is still here, but we all know that soon one of the great offices of state will undoubtedly be his. In the meantime, may we, through him, congratulate the Prime Minister on her choices and the quality of her sackings and dismissals from Government over the last 24 hours? I think that we can agree on that, on a cross-party basis. The new Secretaries of State—the right hon. Members for Halttemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), and for North Somerset (Dr Fox)—are serious politicians, but it seems that their boss is the court jester: the new Foreign Secretary. Will these serious politicians have their own Departments of State, or will they be answering to the new Foreign Secretary?

Chris Grayling: All the new Secretaries of State will be accountable to this House in the normal way when they head a Department. The Department that will take us out of the European Union has been expressly designed by the new Prime Minister to be a separate Department, and its Secretary of State will be accountable to the House in the normal way.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Will the Government make a statement on the implications for the House’s Select Committees of any changes in the organisational structure of the Government?

Chris Grayling: That is also something that we will have to address, probably during the September fortnight. Clearly there is a relationship between a Government Department and a Select Committee, so as new Departments are established, or existing ones are reshaped or renamed, the Select Committee structure will have to change as well. That is something that we will address over the next few days in preparation for either renaming Select Committees or appointing members to new ones when we return after the summer recess.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I for one am extremely pleased to see the Leader of the House still in his position, because in April I advised him that Porthcawl primary school, with its Porthcawl power team, had won second place in the Jaguar Formula 1 primary schools challenge, demonstrating the great capabilities of science, technology, engineering and maths—STEM—teaching in Wales, and I can now bring him the good news that the school won the national championship. Will he give the House a statement of his support and congratulate Porthcawl primary school’s power team on its great success in demonstrating the importance of STEM teaching across the UK? Before I sit down, may I say—on behalf of myself, of the First Minister of Wales, my Assembly Member Carwyn Jones, and of the leader of my local authority, who is our armed forces champion—that in our view, the Labour party strongly supports the armed forces?
Chris Grayling: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making that last point. There are those in the Labour party who do not take that view, or who have misgivings about aspects of the way in which our armed forces work, and many of them sit on the Front Bench, but I know that a large number of people across the ranks on the Labour Benches are as committed to our armed forces as anyone on our side of the House. I am also glad to be able to respond to this latest success. I remember the hon. Lady asking her earlier question and my telling her what a great achievement that was, but to win the national prize is excellent. The school must be enormously proud, and I am sure that everyone across the House would wish to send it their congratulations. She has every reason to be proud of her young constituents.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): The death toll from recent protests in Indian-held Kashmir continues to grow, and hundreds have now been injured in the violence, most of them young people. Many face losing their sight after being blinded by shotgun pellets. Given the widespread concern in the UK about the situation in Kashmir, may we have an urgent debate on the violence there?

Chris Grayling: The reports of the disturbances, injuries and deaths in Kashmir are very worrying, and they will be a matter of very great concern indeed to members of the Kashmiri community in this country. Of course this Government will continue, as we always do, to provide support and encouragement to—and put pressure on—other Governments where this kind of ongoing trouble is taking place. We will continue to do everything we can to facilitate peace in that troubled part of the Asian subcontinent.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): When the Leader of the House was talking about Chilcot earlier, he said that, on the issue of why we went to war in Iraq, it was “for the Labour party to explain itself, not those of us who were in opposition at the time”. That is not entirely true, however, because the Government of which he is a member are refusing to release the confidential advice that Whitehall officials gave to Gordon Brown about the remit of the inquiry. That advice made it impossible for Sir John Chilcot to rule on whether the 2003 war was illegal. The Government’s refusal flies in the face of an Information Tribunal ruling ordering the release of material’s release. This means that the public cannot see the widespread concern in the UK about the situation in Kashmir, may we have an urgent debate on the violence there?

Chris Grayling: I can see the report here in front of me, and the one thing that cannot be said about the Chilcot inquiry is that it was not exhaustive. Over the past couple of weeks, what has emerged is a really detailed piece of work about what happened, the mistakes that were made and the lessons learned, and I think we should all be grateful to Sir John for the work he has done. I do not think that there is any shortage of evidence about what took place.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Following the excellent report a few weeks ago by the Select Committee on Transport, may we have a debate on the full-lane running of motorways without the hard shoulder? Such motorways have recently come to my constituency, and I welcome the investment, but I agree with the Committee’s safety concerns, particularly as at least 20 miles more of this type of motorway is coming to Staffordshire over the next few years.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely understand my hon. Friend’s point. Full-lane running can make a real difference on our motorways, particularly because cars are so much more reliable today than they were a generation ago, but I am aware of the Transport Committee’s concerns. The Government will respond to the report in due course and will always put safety right at the forefront of their considerations.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): May we have a debate on Islamic extremism in UK prisons? The Acheson report is worrying and states that the National Offender Management Service does not have coherent strategy to deal with the threat.

Chris Grayling: I will certainly ensure that the new Justice Secretary is aware of the hon. Gentleman’s concerns. I tracked the issue closely when I was Justice Secretary. I looked very hard, talked to people on the frontline and made significant changes to how we handle Islamic extremism in our prisons, but we clearly need to watch the issue continually, and ensure that all the lessons are learned and that the report’s recommendations are studied carefully. I am sure that the Ministry of Justice will do that.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Both Corby and Kings Cliffe are suffering as a result of post office branch closures, so may we have a debate next week on the importance of putting alternative arrangements in place before branches are closed? Will the Leader of the House join me in calling on the Post Office to sort out this mess as a priority?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I join him in hoping that the Post Office will be careful and proactive in how it approaches closures, including looking for places where alternative provision can be made, particularly for the older generation, who often depend on their local post office. I am sure that the leadership of the Post Office will have heard his comments today and will take note.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The Government recently closed the consultation on reform of the civil service compensation scheme, which has seen significant reforms that the Government claim are fair and affordable in the long term, though we know what the Government’s track record on pensions is like. May we have a debate on that issue? My constituent Libby King transferred within the civil service from Northern Ireland to Scotland with 11 years’ service, and was told that she could not transfer, losing £25,000. May I also ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office—whoever that might be—to carry out an impact assessment and publish its findings, and to respond to the letter that I sent to the Minister some weeks ago?

Chris Grayling: I clearly do not know the details of the case concerned. If the hon. Lady has written to the Minister for the Cabinet Office, I will ask my office to
chase that up on her behalf. She mentioned our record on pensions; I remind her that it was us who relinked the state pension to earnings and created the triple-lock guarantee. We are doing more for our pensioners than previous Governments did for a long time.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Speaking from the Dispatch Box on Monday, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said:

“there is a very real systemic issue with DB”—

defined benefit—

“pension schemes that we need to look at”.—[Official Report, 11 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 12.]

He is right. Of the 6,000 defined benefit schemes in the UK, 5,000 are in deficit. The Pensions Regulator has raised concerns about additional risks to such schemes following the vote to leave the EU. We are talking about a real risk to pension fund members. May we have a debate in Government time on this crucial issue?

Chris Grayling: There is no doubt that defined benefit schemes face enormous pressures because, most fundamentally, of the change in lifespan over the past few decades. It is a good thing that we are living longer, but it makes it much more difficult to fund a pension fund through a vastly longer period of retirement. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about this issue, which the Department for Work and Pensions is monitoring carefully, and he will no doubt take advantage of the opportunities in the House, either in oral questions or in an Adjournment debate on the Floor of the House, to raise the matter directly with Ministers.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Public Health England recently reported a dramatic rise in the incidence of sexually transmitted disease in the UK since 2012. The figures should set alarm bells ringing about the availability of sexual health services, and the strong link between poor sexual health and higher levels of deprivation. May we have an urgent debate in Government time on the provision of sexual health services and investment in prevention to begin to address this growing health crisis?

Chris Grayling: One reason why we devolved responsibility for public health to local authorities is that it provides the opportunity for them to put in place tailored approaches to suit the needs of their local communities. Smart councils can now add very well precisely the kind of problem that the hon. Lady is talking about.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): In yesterday’s Adjournment debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) made an excellent case for a city deal for the Tay cities area and, to be fair, the Minister was very positive in response to that. Stirling has also applied for a city deal, so will the Government make a statement on the status of current bids, including Stirling’s, and in particular on the timescales, given the change of Government and the recent Brexit decision?

Chris Grayling: The city deals are proving to be a very positive thing. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will be here on Monday for Community and Local Government questions. He has been heavily involved in city deals. It is worth remembering that if Scotland were independent from the United Kingdom, there would be no city deals.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): With the news that the new Prime Minister has sacked not only the Culture Secretary, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Justice Secretary, but the Education Secretary, would this be a good opportunity to debate improving the teaching of geography and of classics? Improving the former would allow the Leader of the House to learn the difference between Faslane and Rosyth, while improving the latter would enable the children of this country to learn that the appointment of the new Foreign Secretary must be the most remarkable appointment since the Emperor Caligula appointed his horse a senator.

Chris Grayling: Even the Leader of the House can get momentarily confused between two places, but I am still certain that the Scottish National party would struggle to convince the communities adjoining the base at Faslane that it is a jolly good idea to lose that facility to somewhere else; it makes no sense at all. On learning classics, I remind the hon. Gentleman that more than 1 million more children than in 2010 are being educated in good or excellent schools, and I am very proud of that.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): We now have a Prime Minister who, as Home Secretary, led the charge on scrapping the Human Rights Act. People will be concerned, given her promotion, that this assault on human rights will continue, possibly at a faster rate. May we have a debate on the matter, as that would give the new Cabinet a chance to spell out their intentions clearly?

Chris Grayling: Clearly, the hon. Lady did not listen to the speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) a couple of weeks ago when she launched her campaign to be leader of our party and Prime Minister of this country, in which she said that she was not currently planning to pursue the option mentioned.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): May we have a debate on the powers of trading standards officers, particularly to deal with unscrupulous builders, as I have encountered a number of cases where people have been ripped off?

Chris Grayling: I know that this is a matter of concern, and these things have happened on one or two occasions in my constituency. I believe that trading standards officers have the powers to intervene, but if the hon. Gentleman has specific ideas about where those powers could and should be strengthened and wants to write to me with them, I will pass them to the appropriate Minister.

Michelle Donelan: (Chippenham) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Was the hon. Lady present at the start?

Michelle Donelan: No.
Mr Speaker: In that case, I am afraid that the hon. Lady’s words of wisdom—I do not doubt they will be just that—will have to be put into storage and used on another occasion, to which we all look forward with bated breath and beads of sweat upon our foreheads in eager anticipation.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Westbourne House is a hostility run by Humbercare in my constituency, and it deals with people who have a variety of issues. When it was set up, the chief executive of Humbercare decided not to consult the local community, and he also did not tell me about what was happening. Since then, despite the good efforts of the police and the front-line staff in the hostel, there have been ongoing problems with antisocial behaviour. Would it be possible to have a debate about the responsibilities of people who hold office—chief executives of charities and organisations—when they take decisions that cause real problems in local communities? It seems very difficult to get any action taken in cases such as this.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady makes her point in her customary forthright way. I know that this will be a matter of great concern to her constituents. It is essential that when such facilities are established, they are established in the right place. All of us over the years have discovered cases where that has not happened. The matter will have to be dealt with by the local authorities, but I understand the point that she makes, and she has made it very well.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): In recent weeks, Clydebank Asbestos Group has brought to my attention the fact that requests to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs for workplace histories for those suffering from mesothelioma conditions, such as my constituents George Cairney, Dennis Dunn and Alistair McDermind, are still unresolved after almost a year. Will the Leader of the House urge the new Chancellor of the Exchequer to review HMRC’s procedures and seek early compliance with workplace history requests for those suffering from life-threatening conditions, and to bring that review to the Floor of the House?

Chris Grayling: I understand how desperately difficult it is for people suffering from mesothelioma, which is a horrible, horrible condition. The new Chancellor will be here on Tuesday, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to come to the House and make that point. It is a very important one.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On a point similar to that raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to early-day motion 310 on the civil service compensation scheme and the Government’s proposals to cut exit payments drastically by between 25% and 60%.

That this House is concerned by the Government’s proposed reforms of the Civil Service Compensation Scheme (CSCS); notes the proposal to drastically cut civil service compensation payments by between 25% and 60% per cent, affecting thousands of civil servants across the UK; is alarmed that these reforms are being brought forward at the same time as hundreds of government offices are closing and departments are facing immense pressure to downsize, putting thousands of civil service jobs at risk; is aware that the then Minister for the Cabinet Office introduced changes to the CSCS in 2010 which he described as fair and sustainable in the long term; further notes that an equality impact assessment on these proposed new reforms has not been carried out; is concerned that cuts to the CSCS may affect older workers, women, those with disabilities and minority ethnic civil servants; notes that civil servants across the UK are facing an uncertain future and that additional uncertainty regarding exit payments has had a negative impact on staff morale and health; and therefore calls on the Government to halt its plans to further cut the CSCS and instead invest in the civil service through staff training, decent pay rises and honouring the terms and conditions of all civil servants.

May we have a debate in Government time on this issue, as it is severely affecting civil servants’ morale?

Chris Grayling: This is one of the difficult challenges that we have faced as a Government over the past six years. Ever since we took office in 2010, the compensation schemes have been very much out of kilter with what would happen in the private sector. There comes a point where we have to say that we have a duty to the taxpayer to have a system that is balanced, appropriate and consistent with what people would face in other employment.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am sure the whole House agrees that the UK Government should support the families of service personnel who have died while serving, but a group of UK military widows are prevented from receiving pensions if they remarried before April last year. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on how we can close this illogical and deeply unjust loophole?

Chris Grayling: This is an issue that the hon. Lady and other Members have raised before. I understand the point that she makes. I will make sure that the Defence Secretary is aware of the concerns that she has raised, and will ask him to write to her.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): May we have a debate on Cabinet appointments? It strikes me that aside from insulting foreigners, the new Foreign Secretary is not actually interested in foreign affairs. Since the beginning of this Parliament, he has tabled no written or oral questions to the Foreign Office and has bothered to turn up for only four Foreign and Commonwealth Office statements. Should we move to a position in which Parliament approves Cabinet appointments, as we do in Holyrood, rather than those being made at the Prime Minister’s discretion?

Chris Grayling: Judging by the extent to which Members are going on about the new Foreign Secretary this morning, they must be quite afraid of his appointment.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Last week, I asked the Leader of the House a question about the House of Lords, and I got the worst answer that I have received in this place to date. That is quite an achievement. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman. When asked about the Government’s position, his answer was that the SNP should have brought forward private Members’ Bills. He knows full well that his Back Benchers would talk out private Members’ Bills, and his Government...
have refused to implement the recommendations of the Procedure Committee to improve the private Members’ Bills system. I will therefore try again. Why does the Leader of the House think it is acceptable to have 26 Bishops of the Church of England sitting in the House of Lords making legislation? Why should they be allowed to vote on legislation that affects Scotland?

Chris Grayling: I am going to give the hon. Gentleman the same answer again. I do not believe it is a priority for this country to start reforming the House of Lords. If SNP Members feel so strongly about it, why have we had no Opposition day debate about it and no private Members’ Bills about it? They talk about the issues that they are concerned about, but when they have the chance to act, they simply do not.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is a matter of record that, in recent weeks, there has been a significant escalation in misogynistic abuse and threats of violence, and those have been aimed disproportionately towards female MPs on both sides of the House. It is apparent that this abuse is completely out of hand now, with many Members fearful for their and their staff’s safety, to the point where a number of Members have told me they are worried about their personal health. As we all know, this comes just four weeks to the day after our dear colleague was murdered. This cannot be allowed to continue. Could you advise the House what action it can take to make it clear that this behaviour will not be tolerated from any party and that all perpetrators will be punished appropriately?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling) rose—

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, to whose point of order I will, in a moment, respond in very truncated terms, but the Leader of the House is signalling a desire to contribute, and it is important that we should hear from the right hon. Gentleman.

Chris Grayling: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. May I say first that I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady? A lot of work is taking place on measures to improve the security of right hon. and hon. Members. There is a project group looking in detail at what lessons can be learned from the tragic events of a few weeks ago. Next week, the Commission will consider improvements to the approach we take. Included in that approach will, I hope, be a greater opportunity for individual Members to raise concerns about their safety and to have those concerns acted on. Would everyone in the House please be reassured that you, myself, the Chairman of Ways and Means, and House officials are very mindful of the need for us to step up the security that is available to Members of Parliament and the service we provide to watch over their safety?

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the Leader of the House for saying what he has said. Traditionally, we do not discuss security on the Floor of the House, for very good reasons. That said, the Leader of the House has just pointed out the extent of the work that is taking place behind the scenes, and it is only right that Members should know that what the right hon. Gentleman has said about co-operation between senior colleagues is, of course, absolutely pertinent and on the money.

The Leader of the House, I and the Chairman of Ways and Means are in regular discussion about these matters and, indeed, co-operated only a matter of a few days ago in putting together a letter to register our concerns and constructive proposals—that letter being to another senior colleague. It is also true, as the right hon. Gentleman has said, that these matters will be broached at the meeting of the House of Commons Commission on Monday. By definition, I cannot elaborate, because the discussion is to be had, but it is important that Members know that we are not in any way hermetically...
sealed from the rest of our colleagues; we share and take very seriously these concerns. Moreover, those of us who are quite fortunate in our living accommodation are very conscious of those who are not, to whom we have a very particular sense of responsibility.

So far as the hon. Lady is concerned today, I just make the point that if any individual Member has particular personal concerns as of now, the best course of action is to approach the parliamentary security director for his best advice. He is immensely experienced and better placed at a practical level to give guidance than any of us laypersons could be. I hope that that is helpful, but doubtless there will be further updates in due course.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. If I may, Sir, I would just like to thank you, the Leader of the House and my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) for their contributions, which were very reassuring.

May I seek your guidance about the rules of this place as they refer to the language we use when referring to each other? We call each other honourable Members, and the underlying assumption is that we act honourably and honestly. However, in business questions, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) raised the question of claims being made during the referendum campaign that we now believe to be palpably untrue. If I were to accuse a specific hon. Member of making those statements knowingly, you would instruct me to withdraw those comments, and if I refused, you would instruct me to leave this place. Nevertheless, I and other hon. Members believe that claims were made that were false, and I am looking for a mechanism by which to call out those Members we believe knowingly made them. Is there a mechanism within the rules of the House whereby I can make suggestions without falling foul of the rules, which, of course, we all hold dear?

Mr Speaker: There are procedures available for that purpose—procedures with which some very experienced Members of the House are well familiar. I think that for now my best advice to the hon. Gentleman is that he should go to the Table Office, where the staff will be very well able to point him to the approach or mechanism that might enable him to pursue his objective. It would be a profitable visit for the hon. Gentleman, and it would consume—he will know the whereabouts of the office in question—very little energy.

Report of the Iraq Inquiry

[2ND DAY]


Debate resumed (Order, 13 July).

Question again proposed,

That this House has considered the Report of the Iraq Inquiry.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the first speaker—from the Back Benches, as this is a continuation of the debate that began yesterday—I should say to the House that at this stage I have not imposed a time limit on speeches. The House will be aware that there will have to be wind-up speeches from the Opposition Front Bench and the Government Front Bench tonight, for which I have to allow, but beyond that, I will wait to see how things go. My best advice to colleagues is that if each feels able to contribute for 10 minutes, but not much more than that, it may not be necessary to have any formal limit. There is therefore a burden on the shoulders of distinguished colleagues as they commence their contributions. That burden, I am sure, will be keenly felt by the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis).

11.27 am

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you very much for calling me, Mr Speaker. I shall endeavour to follow your injunction to be brief. There is a very good reason to be brief at this stage of consideration of the Chilcot report, and that is that we have had very little time to consider a very large mass of detailed information.

I generally find, when trying to unravel what has happened historically, that it is sensible to look back at some of the original sources. In the very short time available, I have picked out a few original documents that have been included in the mass of published material. One of them is the Joint Intelligence Committee assessment dated 29 January 2003 and entitled, “Iraq: the emerging view from Baghdad”. I shall refer to two quotations. At paragraph 10, the JIC says:

“We are unlikely to receive any advance warning of a pre-emptive attack on the Kurds. We judge that a pre-emptive limited artillery strike on Kuwait using CBW could be launched in as little as two hours.”
At another point in the report, a list of things that might be the result of an attack on Saddam Hussein is given. One of these possibilities is described in the following terms:

“to inflict high enough casualties on any coalition ground forces, perhaps in Kuwait, including through the use of CBW, to halt a coalition attack and to swing public opinion in the West against hostilities.”

Another note, entitled, “Saddam: The Beginning of the End”, which was prepared by the assessment staff following a discussion at the JIC on 19 March 2003, states:

“We judge Iraq has a useable CBW capability, deliverable using artillery, missiles and possibly unmanned aerial vehicles. We judge Iraq possesses up to 20 al-Hussein missiles with a range of up to 650km and 100s of shorter range missiles, mostly with a range of 150km or less. These missiles may be able to deliver CBW, although intelligence suggests that Iraq may lack warheads capable of effective dispersal of such agents.”

The reason I quote those two documents is that they were top secret documents that were never intended for publication until the archives eventually came to be released many years later. They show, beyond any reasonable doubt, that the advice received by the Labour Government at that time was that Saddam Hussein did possess, in the assessment of our intelligence agencies, chemical and biological weapons. We now know that that was wrong, but we also know, as a result of the release of those documents, that the Labour Government of the day did not lie to Parliament over the question of their belief that chemical and biological weapons were kept.

More contentious is the question of whether or not Tony Blair exaggerated. That is a matter of harder judgment, but I sometimes wonder what the reaction of Parliament would have been if he had come to us and said, “We really don’t know for certain whether Saddam Hussein still has chemical and biological weapons. We know he has had them in the past and used them. Because we can’t be certain that he hasn’t got them now, because of the events that happened only a matter of months earlier, which put al-Qaeda and its suicide brand of terrorism on the world stage, and because we cannot be sure that, for reasons of his own, he might not seek to supply such weapons to suicidal terrorist groups, we judge that we can’t take the chance.”

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman’s useful approach in going back to the primary sources. Does not the information to which he refers, though, highlight just how dangerous it is to go to war on the basis of intelligence alone, which is essentially what marked the Iraq war out from every other one? Does he agree that the process of making intelligence available for assessment by this House has to be improved, or we could risk doing it again?

Dr Lewis: That is very tricky, because there are two scenarios where we can go to war. One is quite straightforward: somebody attacks us and we get on with it, because we are given no choice. The other is a situation such as that under discussion, where we have reason to believe that something horrible could happen and the question arises of whether we should intervene.

One of the most problematic aspects of the Chilcot report is its statement that military action was “not a last resort” and that the peace process could have been given longer. The reality is that, unless an attack is launched on us, we can always go on talking for longer. I cannot think of any point at which it would be possible to say, “We have to launch an attack now because there is no prospect of continuing to try to find out without taking military action.”

The right hon. Gentleman talks about this House having to assess the intelligence, but I am not sure that that helps us too much. We can never be certain that what we are assessing is the whole picture, because sometimes, as those of us who have served on bodies such as the Intelligence and Security Committee will know, there are sources of intelligence that cannot be revealed. Therefore, to present raw intelligence to the House, without being able to say that there is other intelligence not being presented to the House, leaves the House in an anomalous position.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, in 2003, the House voted not just, or even mainly, on the intelligence? If you look at the debate, Mr Speaker, you will see that the House voted on Saddam Hussein’s repeated and unprecedented non-compliance with mandatory United Nations resolutions and on his record. Does the right hon. Gentleman think from his reading of the report that Saddam Hussein executed a massive bluff on the international community and his own people by pretending that he still had the weapons we know he had, or does he agree with the current Iraqi Government that Saddam sent them across the border to Syria?

Dr Lewis: I agree with a great deal of what the right hon. Gentleman has just said. Although it is not a matter of primary concern to us now, the fact is that Saddam Hussein was the author of his own misfortune. We must remember that, apart from being a brutal dictator, Saddam Hussein had invaded and occupied Kuwait in 1990. He chose to try to convince his own people that he had not given up these weapons, when either he had given them up or, as the right hon. Gentleman said and as rumours persist to this day, he had spirited them away, possibly to Syria. However, although I see a degree of agreement with me on the matters of primary concern, the rumour continues to this day, and those on the Labour Benches over this issue, they may find it a little harder to accept the next point that I wish to make.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I have great respect for my right hon. Friend, as he will know. However, I suggest that, on this issue, it was not just about intelligence sourcing from here. The United Nations inspectors at the time were pleading for more time because they could not find the WMDs upon which premise we were going to war. We should have listened to them as well. Ultimately, the reason they could not find the WMDs is that they did not exist.

Dr Lewis: Yes, but the problem that the inspectors and we would always have faced was summed up by something that was said at the Hutton inquiry into the death of Dr David Kelly. I was going to quote this later, but I shall do so now. On 21 August 2003, I attended the Hutton inquiry. In the course of giving evidence, Nicolas Rufford, a journalist, made a statement about a telephone conversation that he had had with Dr David Kelly in June 2003. Dr Kelly was, of course, a weapons expert,
and knew all about the difficulties of detecting weapons stockpiles if they were hidden. In the course of that telephone conversation, Dr Kelly said to Mr Rufford that “it was very easy to hide weapons of mass destruction because you simply had to dig a hole in the desert, put them inside, cover them with a tarpaulin, cover them with sand and then they would be almost impossible to discover”.

So the question that we come back to once again is: if Tony Blair had come to this House and more honestly highlighted the question marks against the reliability of the intelligence, would he be as excoriated today as he has been? Let me be counterfactual for a moment. Let us suppose that some stocks of anthrax had been discovered and there had been a secret cache. Would we still be saying that the people who took the decision in 2003, on the basis of what clearly was an honest belief that Saddam Hussein might have deadly stocks of anthrax, were wrong? I have no hesitation in saying that although the Government may have exaggerated—and probably were wrong? I have no hesitation in saying that although the Government may have exaggerated—and probably did exaggerate—the strength of the evidence they had, I believe that they genuinely expected to find stocks of these weapons.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Lewis: Yes, but I am taking a lot of interventions, and I am keen not to abuse the fact that I do not have a time limit.

George Kerevan: Given the right hon. Gentleman’s wisdom and expertise, he is a focal point in this discussion. Does he accept that there are some on these Benches who think—and who feel that this is justified by the Chilcot findings—that the whole issue of weapons of mass destruction was an artificial casus belli that was used to effect regime change? If weapons of mass destruction were an issue, why wait 13 years to invade? Why not go in at the time of the first Iraq war?

Dr Lewis: The answer to the second question is easy. What happened during those 13 years was the appearance on the international stage, in September 2001, of a group that had been around for a long time but had not previously succeeded in killing 3,000 people in the heart of New York and Washington DC. [Interruption.] Therefore, the issue at question, as we often hear quite rightly said in debates about international terrorism, was that the traditional policy—the technique of containment, which is usually the best technique to deal with rogue regimes that have weapons stocks—could no longer apply under the circumstances. It was feared that if an international terrorist organisation was, for any reason, supplied with a substance such as anthrax, rational deterrence would be ineffective in preventing the organisation from using it, no matter how suicidally.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Given the role that my right hon. Friend plays as Chairman of the Defence Committee, I wonder whether he could qualify the statement that he has just made, which caused a reaction in the House. He suggested that somehow the events of 9/11 created a different scenario in Iraq. Does he not agree with me that in 2003, al-Qaeda was not present in Iraq, and therefore the relationship between 9/11 and Iraq, unlike Afghanistan, cannot be made?

Dr Lewis: I do agree that al-Qaeda was not present in Iraq at the time, but that is not the point that I was making. The point that I was making was that the west was in a major stand-off with Saddam Hussein, and people use other groups and organisations for their own ends. The danger was—the then Prime Minister said this at the time, and it is what convinced me to support him—that Saddam Hussein might, for reasons of his own, decide to make some of these weapons available to certain groups, not because he was allied to such groups but because he and al-Qaeda shared a common enemy in the west.

I want to move on. Some Members will agree with what I have said, and others will not. Let me continue with the second branch of my remarks, and then it will be for other Members to put their own perspective on the matter. I hasten to add that although my chairmanship of the Defence Committee has been referred to a number of times, I am, of course, speaking entirely on my own behalf as someone who was here at the time and took part in the debate and the vote.

When I look back at those circumstances, I say to myself that the primary reason why I supported and spoke in favour of military action was that I believed what I was told by the then Labour Government about the possession of anthrax and other weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussein. But here is where I have to make a major admission. At the back of my mind, and at the back, I believe, of many other hon. Members’ minds, was a second belief. It was the belief that if Saddam Hussein were removed, we might see the emergence of some form of democracy in Iraq. I was profoundly mistaken in that belief. From looking at the scenario as it developed, it is quite clear that what emerged was not any form of democracy; instead, there re-emerged the mutual hatreds between different branches of fundamentalist Islam that has led to bitter conflict for more than 1,000 years.

That was the lesson I drew from the Iraq war. It is also why, when it subsequently became clear that the same scenario would be played out in other theatres for the same sort of reasons—in particular, in relation to Syria in August 2013—I was determined not to make the same mistake again. Along with 29 other right hon. and hon. Members of the Conservative party and nine Liberal Democrats, I therefore voted not to take the same sort of action against President Assad as we had taken against Saddam Hussein. I remember hearing exactly the same sort of arguments in favour of removing Assad as everyone now accepts had been inadequate arguments for removing Saddam Hussein.

Members who feel strongly that it was the wrong thing to do in 2003 ought to check what the consequences have been of not taking the same sort of step in 2013. Since 2013 huge bloodletting has continued in Syria, but many of us still argue that if the choice is between an authoritarian dictatorship and totalitarian civil conflict engaged in by people who believe that suicide terrorism is the answer to the world’s problems and the fastest route to paradise, we should appreciate that very often there are no simple or easy answers in such dilemmas.
Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): I have great respect for the Chairman of the Defence Committee—in fact, I believe I voted for him. Is he saying that if he had his time again he would vote against the Iraq war in 2003 and for the Syrian conflict in 2013?

Dr Lewis: I am saying that I was absolutely right not to vote to remove Assad in 2013 and absolutely wrong to vote as I did in 2003, but that I did so because I believed what I was told about weapons of mass destruction and also believed—wrongly—that there was a chance for Iraqi society to advance along more democratic lines. That was my terrible error.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr Lewis: I shall make a little more progress first.

My last point leads me to a second question. I hope that I have, in effect, shown that when the Labour Government of the day said to the House that they believed there were weapons of mass destruction they were not lying, and that there was a reasonable case to be made on those grounds for taking the action that was taken. However, the papers also show that the Prime Minister of the day, Tony Blair, was not unaware of the possible consequences of removing Saddam Hussein.

In his public statement, Sir John Chilcot said:

“We do not agree that hindsight is required. The risks of internal strife in Iraq, active Iranian pursuit of its interests, regional instability, and Al Qaida activity in Iraq, were each explicitly identified before the invasion.”

He added:

“Despite explicit warnings, the consequences of the invasion were underestimated. The planning and preparations for Iraq after Saddam Hussein were wholly inadequate.”

In a briefing note in January 2003 from Mr Blair to President Bush, the then Prime Minister wrote:

“The biggest risk we face is internecine fighting between all the rival groups, religions, tribes, etc, in Iraq, when the military strike destabilises the regime. They are perfectly capable, on previous form, of killing each other in large numbers.”

Let us remind ourselves that the vast total of deaths that have taken place in Iraq are not people who have been killed by westerners; they are Muslims who have been killed by other Muslims since the lid of authoritarian repression was removed.

Philip Davies: I am nervous about opening up a new front for my right hon. Friend, but some of the deaths in Iraq were clearly of our soldiers, and Chilcot said that there were some “serious equipment shortfalls when conflict began”.

Two of my constituents died in action in Iraq—Sergeant Roberts died because he did not have the right body armour, and Flight Lieutenant Stead died because his Hercules did not have the proper suppressant foam fitted. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should never, ever, again send our armed forces into combat without properly equipping them for the task in hand?

Dr Lewis: Never, ever, again is a strong statement, and when a conflict arises, especially when it is the result of unforeseen events, it is seldom the case that the armed forces are fully equipped in every respect.

The history of our engagement in many conflicts is of a disastrous start that is usually gradually rectified as the conflict goes on. The report clearly brings out that, for far too long while the conflict was going on, equipment deficiencies were not identified and remedied—I will leave it at that for the moment.

I have two points on which to conclude. First, we must now accept that societies are unready for western-style democracy while their politics remain indissolubly linked to totalitarian, religious supremacism. I am not saying anything racialist in making those remarks, because only a few hundred years ago, religious wars devastated Europe, and here in England heretics were treated just as barbarously as they are in the middle east today. If the democratic model is to work, it usually has to evolve. If it does not evolve, a country must be totally occupied for many years in order for such a model to be implanted and to take root.

Secondly, the then Foreign Secretary said yesterday that he believed that some of those decisions, which were mistaken at the time, would less likely be taken in future because of the creation and existence of the National Security Council, and that that council is a forum where such matters could be thrashed out more realistically. I am not sure that that forum is quite strong enough. In bygone years, the heads of each of the three services had a direct input into the policy debate. The Chiefs of Staff Committee was a body that had to be reckoned with, even by Prime Ministers as forceful as Winston Churchill. Our current arrangements, in which the Chiefs of Staff are supposed to funnel their views to politicians through the medium of just one person—the Chief of the Defence Staff—are entirely inadequate.

I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary is continuing in his post and I am pleased he is here to hear me say something that I hope he will be hearing more about from the Defence Committee, which is that there is too much of a disconnect between our top military advisers and the politicians. It is easier for a Prime Minister with a bee in his bonnet about overthrowing one regime or another to brush aside the words of one man, no matter how authoritative any given Chief of the Defence Staff may be, than it is to brush aside the contribution of the heads of the armed forces as a body.

The Defence Committee suggested, in one of its final reports under my predecessor as Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), that the Chiefs of Staff Committee needed to be constituted as the military sub-committee of the National Security Council. The recommendation was ignored in the reply to that report, but I reiterate it today. We must have authoritative and expert people who are in a position to stand up to a Prime Minister on a mission, whether to remove Saddam Hussein or to remove Gaddafi while telling this House that we are just going to implement a no-fly zone to protect the citizens of Benghaz. It is very important that the strategic calculus should be properly presented to politicians, so we do not ever again have a situation, as we are told happened over Libya, where a Chief of the Defence Staff is told to do the fighting while the politicians do the planning.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who very helpfully gave the House the product of his lucubrations and interpreted my guidance loosely. He had to take
lots of interventions—that is certainly true. There is no time limit. I am leaving the House to regulate itself, but Members will want to take account of the fact that people might try to intervene on them. I say in all sincerity that we want everybody to get in. I thank the right hon. Gentleman. The next contributor will be Ben Bradshaw. [ Interruption. ] No, the right hon. Gentleman does not now wish to contribute. I rather hope that Mr Pat McFadden does.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I am happy to be a substitute for my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), Mr Speaker.

The decision to go to war in Iraq was, certainly in foreign policy terms, the most controversial decision of the Blair premiership and, indeed, of the entire Labour period in government. One hundred and seventy-nine British troops died, as did more than 4,000 American troops, and many thousands of Iraqi civilians in the chaos and destruction afterwards. Sir John’s inquiry was asked to look at how the decision was taken and what lessons can be learned.

First, there is the crucial question of whether the war was based on a lie. On this, the report concludes: “there is no evidence that intelligence was improperly included in the dossier or that No 10 improperly influenced the text.” Prior to the report’s publication, there had been years of accusations about fabricating intelligence. In the wake of its publication a different question has been raised, which is why the intelligence was not challenged more.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) quoted from some Joint Intelligence Committee reports. I do not need to repeat those particular quotes, but in 2002 the reports say that the intelligence was “sporadic and patchy”. They also say: “it is clear that Iraq continues to pursue a policy of acquiring WMD and their delivery means”; that “Iraq has an offensive chemical warfare programme” and that “Iraq has a chemical and biological weapons capability and Saddam is prepared to use it”.

This view turned out to be wrong, but it was genuinely felt and reported to the Government time after time. It was shared by many intelligence services around the world, including in countries fiercely opposed to the war. Sir John makes important recommendations about how intelligence is to be assessed and challenged in the future, but they are not the same as accusations of fabrication, lying or using intelligence deliberately to mislead.

Sir John concludes that the war was “not a last resort”, that the inspection process should have been given more time, and that the decision to use military action “undermined the authority” of the UN Security Council. This finding raises a huge and fundamental question, particularly in view of the fact that Saddam Hussein had been in breach of a whole series of UN Security Council resolutions over a period of 12 years, and that he had in the past used chemical weapons against his own people. One therefore has to ask who was really undermining the UN. Was it the country in breach, or the countries trying to enforce the UN’s will?

What does this finding mean for the responsibility to protect? My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) raised that issue yesterday. Is one of the lessons that we should never engage in military action, no matter how multiple the breaches of previous UN Security Council resolutions, unless there is full support from the Security Council itself? If that is our conclusion, what does that mean for the authority of the UN? This was not the view that we took in Kosovo. That action, although it was opposed by some, is generally felt to have produced a positive outcome for the people and to have prevented a disaster in the Balkans.

Thirdly, I turn to the aftermath, and the chaos and destruction that ensued.

Mr Alistair Carmichael: The question for the House is whether there is the weight of evidence to justify action, not if we should never act without express authority from the UN Security Council, which would be just one piece of evidence that the House should take into consideration. In the case of Kosovo, which is a good example, there were other reasons for acting as we did. I supported that action then and continue to support it now.

Mr McFadden: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman’s intervention. My point is that the finding about undermining the authority of the UN raises huge questions. It is one of the most controversial findings in the report.

Colin Powell famously remarked: “If you break it, you own it.” It is undoubtedly the responsibility of countries that remove a brutal dictator to put in place security measures afterwards. On this point, Sir John’s report is understandably critical of the UK and the US. With intervention comes responsibility. Security is a key part of that responsibility, but we should be clear about two other points: first, the killing of innocent civilians in Iraq was carried out not by UK or US armed forces, but by terrorists and militias that blew up the UN headquarters, attacked mosques, destroyed already fragile infrastructure and bombed marketplaces; and, secondly, that sectarian violence and killings in Iraq did not begin in 2003. Prior to that, it was carried out by the Saddam regime itself: the Anfal campaign; the use of chemical weapons against the Kurds in the north; and the brutal suppression of the Shi’a uprising after the first Gulf war in 1991. It was a reign of terror. Decades on, mass graves are still being discovered. I pay tribute to the courage and determination of my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), who was campaigning for the victims of Saddam’s brutal regime long before the Iraq war in 2003.

Fourthly, what is the lesson for our own security? I believe that people supported the Iraq war for different reasons, and many opposed it for different reasons. They should not all be put in the one bracket. Not everyone has drawn a direct line between this intervention and all the security problems we face, but some have. Foreign interventions will anger jihadists, and may also be used as a recruiting sergeant for jihadists, but it would be a fundamental mistake to believe that the mass murder of innocent people is only a response to what we do, and that if we stopped doing it, they would leave us alone. We should remember that Islamist terrorism existed long before the Iraq war. The USS Cole was
bombed in 2000. The World Trade Centre was first bombed in 1993 and then destroyed in 2001, with the loss of 3,000 innocent lives. In Bali in 2002, we saw the murder of hundreds of innocent tourists, and there have been many more attacks around the world since, including last year in Paris. That attack took place in the country in Europe that was the most opposed to the Iraq war.

Let me repeat something I have said here before. Understanding Islamist terrorism simply as a reaction to what we do infantilises terrorists, fails to confer responsibility on them for what they do, and fails to stand up for the pluralism, equality, diversity and religious freedom that we hold dear. Whatever lesson we learn from past interventions, it should not be to franchise out our foreign policy decisions for the approval or veto of the terrorists who oppose our way of life.

Finally, there is the lesson on intervention itself. Sir John makes a number of recommendations on this point—about how intelligence should be treated, ministerial oversight, the challenge of arguments and so forth. The recommendations look eminently sensible, and I am sure that any future Government will take them on board. The truth is, however, that this is not just a matter of process.

Mr Brashaw: My right hon. Friend made a strong critique of one of Sir John’s findings about the undermining of the United Nations. Another finding that I consider problematic is the “last resort” suggestion, which was also criticised by the Chair of the Defence Committee. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, at that time, it was clear that time was running out? Saddam had been given 90 days when the resolution specified 30 days, so saying that other avenues could somehow be explored was not realistic at the time.

Mr McFadden: I agree with my right hon. Friend. At some point, there is always the issue of deciding. Every debate about intervention since 2003 has taken place in the shadow of this decision. Iraq has already increased the threshold for military action and the Chilcot report will raise it further. There is an inescapable question, however. To put it bluntly, we can have all the committees and processes that we want, but we still have to decide. The decision can go wrong, and everything that will happen in the aftermath cannot be predicted.

Much has been said about the size of the report, with its 2.5 million words. If we stack the volumes on top of one another, the paper would stand about 2 feet high. The very sight of the report will be a warning to future Prime Ministers. Since 2003, Prime Ministers and Presidents have been very conscious about learning from Iraq, and this report will make them even more conscious in the future. The biggest question of all is this: in reflecting on what went wrong after the invasion and the findings of the report, and adding in the reduced size of our armed forces in recent years, what if the conclusion was, “Never intervene again”? What message would that send out to the oppressed of the world, to dictators or to terrorist groups?

I was not an MP in 2003, so I never had to face the responsibility of voting for the war in Iraq. The most significant vote on foreign policy since I was elected was over Syria in 2013, and that vote was heavily coloured by our experience in Iraq. I have a slightly different interpretation from that of the right hon. Member for New Forest East. I voted against military action in 2013, even after Assad had used chemical weapons against his own people. Yet Syria, where we did not intervene beyond the limited airstrikes we voted for last year, has been a humanitarian disaster even worse than Iraq. Hundreds of thousands are dead, millions have been displaced, and we have seen the greatest movement of refugees since the end of the second world war. It is not a vote to intervene that has troubled me most in my 11 years here; it is that vote not to intervene, as the international community, with the exception of Russia—where have the demonstrations outside its embassy been?—stood back and decided that it was all too difficult. There is no Chilcot report on Syria. We can tell ourselves that because we did not break it, we did not buy it, but that makes absolutely no difference to the human cost.

So let us learn, but let us not sign a blank cheque for despots and terrorist groups around the world, or delude ourselves that the security issues that we face stem only from our foreign policy decisions, rather than from an ideology that encourages the killing of innocent people in countries around the world. Yes, intervening has consequences—2.5 million words detailing those consequences are before us—but so does standing back, and leadership is about deciding the difference.

12.10 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I suggest that Iraq 2003 ranks with Suez in a catalogue of British foreign policy disasters. It cost the lives of more than 200 British nationals and many tens of thousands of Iraqi nationals and citizens, and set in train a terrible sequence of events, including a vicious civil war and a fundamental alteration in the balance of power in the region. Thirteen years later, we are still living with many of those consequences.

Given that I resigned from the shadow Front Bench in 2003 to vote against the war, I suppose it could be said that it marked a pivotal point in my political career, such as it has been, so for me it has been of rather more than passing interest to observe the progress of the Chilcot report. I defended the time that Sir John Chilcot took, and I want to take this opportunity to thank him and his team for the thoroughness of the report.

As a former soldier, I believe that, whatever has been said previously, war should always be the measure of last resort, to be taken when all other possibilities have been exhausted. We should never lose sight of that simple fact. Of course there is such a thing as a just war, but at the same time we owe it to our citizens, to our Parliament and, above all, to the soldiers whom we are committing to battle to recognise that it must be the measure of last resort. In my view, the overriding, the most important and the most damning conclusion of Sir John’s report was that Iraq was not, in fact, that last resort and that other possibilities had not been exhausted.

The report made other points. It said that the premise on which we went to war—the existence of weapons of mass destruction—was oversold and that there was a discarding of caveats attached to the intelligence. It
referred to a lack of preparedness in respect of our armed forces, to deficiencies in equipment and to an absence of post-war planning, all which have been touched on before. That litany of errors was compounded by an overestimation of our influence over the United States. We could not, at the time, believe that it could be in our interests not to be on the frontline. I think that one of the proudest and best moments for Prime Minister Wilson was when he said no to the Americans over Vietnam. That did not fracture the so-called special relationship, which, within 15 or 20 years, was on a very firm footing indeed.

I do not intend to look back at all the errors in that litany, but I suggest that there are two key lessons from this episode on which we would do well to reflect. First, Parliament should have done more to question the evidence put before it. That was a failure at almost every level. If the legislature does not examine the evidence and question the Executive at times like that, when is it going to do so? There was also the failure of those in the know—at all levels, in my view, but particularly in the Cabinet—to challenge what was being presented to the public. I think that the one figure who stands proud among that select group of people in the Cabinet—to challenge what was being said during that eventful debate in 2003 has been proved right. I contributed to that debate as well, but his was one of the best speeches that I had heard for a very long time.

We should have questioned more. We should have examined the detail. I was told to stop asking awkward questions, but we, the official Opposition, were asking so few awkward questions that it was suggested to me from the other side that we were trying to play political games with the issue, perhaps hoping that, if it blew up in the Government’s face, we could take advantage of the fact. That is how bad it got during that debate in 2003. We were simply not asking enough questions, and we should have done so.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I was here in 2003, and I was one of those who rebelled against the leader of my party and voted against action in the Iraq war. I think that the hon. Gentleman is being disingenuous, because it was one of the biggest rebellions that there had been against a Government from that Government’s side.

I remember how difficult it was to make that judgment against the leader. When someone is being led by a party leader whose judgment they respect, it is a tough call to say, “I am going to disagree, and vote against action of that kind.” I had a difference of opinion, and I have had no cause to change my mind about the decision that I made, but can the hon. Gentleman not accept, as I do, that the people who made those decisions did so believing that they were doing the right thing?

Mr Baron: I do not think that we are saying different things. I am not suggesting that there was intentional deceit. What I am suggesting is that many of us in this place did not question sufficiently the evidence that was before us. The report from the Joint Intelligence Committee was full of caveats and holes, yet we relied on the Prime Minister’s interpretation, which was given in his foreword to the report.

I fully respect Members’ views as expressed on that fateful evening itself. If one cannot trust the Prime Minister, standing at the Dispatch Box making the case for war and, perhaps, privy to intelligence that we have not seen, it is a sad turn of events. However, I must return to the fundamental point that we should have questioned more, because there was a firm lack of evidence of weapons of mass destruction, and such evidence was the premise for war. We must not forget that central consideration.

The reason the United Nations inspectors were pleading for more time, by the way, was that they could not find any weapons of mass destruction, and they could not find them because they did not exist. We should remember that it was the UN that was asking us to give it more time. The problem was that, at that point, we were marching to a military timetable.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I hope that the hon. Gentleman and you, Mr Speaker, will indulge me for a second. My speaking time was reduced to four minutes yesterday, so I did not have an opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, Robin Cook. Had it not been for his untimely death, I would not be in this place, and he was my Member of Parliament when I was growing up. I wanted to say that we might have disagreed on many things, but on Iraq we did agree. I know that he is missed very much by his family, his friends and his party.

Mr Baron: I thank the hon. Lady for what she has said. I am sure that it will be taken on board by all concerned.

I am conscious that time is pressing on, Mr Speaker, so I shall try to wrap up my speech in the next few minutes; I know that many other Members want to speak.

The second important lesson that I think we should learn from Iraq is that we need a properly functioning, properly funded and well-sited foreign policy apparatus. There is no doubt that Iraq revealed clear deficiencies in that apparatus, and subsequent interventions suggest buy into and influence the system. In this country, it is much more open and diverse; there are lobbyists and a pyramid in foreign policy making. In the States, it is much more narrowly defined; it is the preserve of the select few, and the FCO is part of the few, which is why it must be firing on all cylinders, but it has not been doing so.

That is why we need proper funding of the FCO. Its budget has been continually eroded, with a hollowing out of expertise and staff. Traditional skills like languages
and knowledge of events on the ground and of peoples and places have all been downgraded, as illustrated by the closure of the in-house language school and the gutting of the venerable library.

How did we get to the point that when Russia intervened in Ukraine we did not have one Crimean expert in the FCO? How is it that when the Arab uprising took place we had so few Arabists that we were calling them out of retirement? How is it that we have a DFID budget 10 times the budget of the FCO? This does not serve us well. We need to increase the budget and have long-term investment to make sure we are as well-sighted as we can be, which is not the case at the moment. There is a continual pressure on the FCO budget, and we need to put that right.

It is no surprise that Parliament—the legislature—has raised the bar with regard to interventions. It expects to be consulted. That is one of the positive developments from the Iraq intervention. The rationale is straightforward: if we believe there is a loss of expertise at the heart of our foreign policy apparatus and if there is a lack of trust not just because of Iraq, but because of Helmand, Libya and Syria, the bar needs to be raised, but this is not a healthy position in the longer term. In this increasingly challenging international environment, we need a knowledgeable Executive to be firing on all cylinders. A well-informed and resourced FCO is essential to that, both to act as a better counterweight to the impulses of No. 10 and possibly to help us avoid costly errors and conflicts in the future. There must be within the system a readiness to speak truth to power, and I am not sure we are quite there yet, but that is one of the key lessons from Iraq.

The UK and the west face enormous geopolitical challenges. The world’s population will rise to 9 billion by 2050, with changing distribution—which is particularly of relevance to Africa—and urbanisation and the consequent strain on natural resources. Today, 1 billion people lack access to sufficient potable water, and by 2050 three-quarters of the world’s population could face water scarcity. A whole array of security and environmental challenges is caused by economic and political uncertainty. In today’s global information world, success will depend not only on who prevails by force but on who wins the story.

One of the lessons from the Iraq failure is that it is symptomatic of a wider malaise: the deficiency of strategic analysis at the core of our foreign policy apparatus. The greatest challenge for policy makers is to ensure we embrace flexibility and foresight. This is perhaps diplomacy’s greatest challenge. We must restore our foreign policy and defence capabilities, otherwise the country risks being left behind. This is happening at a time when the international community is failing to produce co-ordinated responses to many of the challenges facing mankind, including poverty, organised crime, conflict, disease, hunger and inequalities.

We must have a properly resourced and respected foreign policy apparatus and investment in soft power and old friendships and strong defence, because diplomacy and soft power cannot succeed by themselves. We must have this proper funding in place for our FCO, because if we are not well-sighted, the next intervention challenge—there will be more—might not be as local in its ramifications as these past errors have been. The costs of getting it wrong might be much greater next time.

12.25 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and to follow the previous speakers, who have a great wealth and depth of information and knowledge to bring to it. If I wanted to sum up my comments I would say, “Mistakes made and lessons learned.”

British forces peaked at 46,000 during the invasion phase, but of course due to the way the tours system worked at the time, more actually served. I pay tribute to the 179 very brave and courageous servicemen and women who gave their lives during the campaign, and also to those gallant Members of this House and the other place who served.

The Chilcot inquiry and report have raised many questions, and the general public need answers. The lack of answers on key issues is the cause of much of the public’s rage. We followed the American lead without properly analysing intelligence. That is absolutely clear from the now public comment of Mr Blair to the then President of the United States:

“`I will be with you, whatever’”—unconditional support.

We need to be much more discerning about the way we interrogate intelligence material and information. It is imperative to note that the plan for success was absent. In 2003, there was outrageous and unexpected success, for which we had no plan. No one was able to foresee Hussein capitulating so early, and thus Iraq fell apart with no one to deliver the stable, successful programmes that existed, such as the oil for aid programme. We did not have a plan, a vision or an understanding of what would happen if we were successful in battle at that time. The vacuum that plunged the entire region into instability is felt strongly to this day, not only in the region but across the world.

We also did not understand the complex society of Iraq. There was no understanding of cultural sensitivities or local divisions, sectarianism or politics, which meant that our presence was further resented as time went on and things did not get better. There was also the unprecedented Shi’a majority uprising in Basra, where the Iran-Iraq war was most pronounced. All these things were unforeseen.

We cannot keep sending forces to places that they are unprepared to go to, in terms of equipment and understanding the reason. Estimates of the length of time a mission may take need to be more conservative and honest in future, not only to prepare our armed forces fully, but to regain the much-damaged public trust. I was not a Member of this House at the time of the Iraq war, but constituents have come to me who were sending socks, boots, food, body-warmers and, on one occasion I am aware of, body armour, to their people in Iraq. There is something wrong when our people serve overseas and we, their families, have to send them stuff the Army should give them when they first go out. There needs to be an honest conversation about that.

A lot of the things that went wrong can be explained by a lack of resources. We simply have not got the capacity to fight on so many fronts anymore. It is now
clear that we greatly underestimated the capability of the enemy. What worked against rocket-propelled grenades in Ulster was not fit to take on 250-lb improvised explosive devices in Iraq. That is another important learning point that must be taken forward.

I want to talk about veterans, and the family support package when the soldiers were away. At that time, just two soldiers were left at headquarters to look after family affairs, and given the number of deaths and injuries, the situation became almost overpowering for them. I know things have changed, and I welcome those changes, but we have to build on this and make sure that the veterans are not forgotten, as some in the past have been. We need foresight, and we need to build on lessons learned and to continue learning, so that we only move forward in how we treat our armed forces.

I want to talk about the pension of a gentleman who served in uniform. His story will be well known to those who read The Sunday Times. His name is Chris Braithwaite, 41, a former major in the Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment who served in Afghanistan, the Balkans and Iraq. He said:

“When we were in Basra, we were subjected to rocket and mortar attacks daily for seven months. This was a great worry for my wife, Laura, but we believed that the financial support which is provided by the army in recognition of long service would reflect that family sacrifice—until the rug was pulled from under us.

On the same day that I received the Queen’s diamond jubilee medal in recognition of my service, I was given the news that I would be made redundant just 87 days short of the 16 years’ service I needed to receive an immediate pension.”

We are talking about people who fought for Queen and country. They did their bit, but when they needed support back home, it fell short with a vengeance. We must take care of our veterans. We must make sure that they receive absolutely first-class service from the state. It is vital that they are offered, and get, the best.

I have asked this question before and I ask it again today: will we see the statistic some day that more Iraq veterans have committed suicide than were killed in the conflict? We must confront the issue of how we treat our veterans. The Chilcot report gives us the opportunity to do just that, and it must be fully assessed. More British soldiers and veterans took their life in 2012 than died fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan over the same period. These are statistical facts. I do not like having to put them before the House, but we need to recognise them.

I want briefly to mention the reserves. This is another imperative issue, and there could be awful consequences if it is not addressed. We were using the highest number of reservists on record, and we have no method of tracking what happened to them when they came home, or of finding out whether they have fallen victim to any of the problems associated with veterans. Despite all this, the number of reservists was cut from 45,000 to 30,000 after the Iraq war. Clearly there needs to be a rethink.

Referring to the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, the Belfast-born commander Tim Collins, who led the Royal Irish Regiment into Iraq in March 2003, has said:

“It may well be he was actually drunk on his self-importance having had successes in Kosovo and Sierra Leone, and having brokered the Good Friday Agreement, he genuinely believed he could do no wrong.”

This is in keeping with the memo that was sent to President Bush. It is increasingly clear that our soldiers were being sent to war by Tony Blair, no matter what. Tim Collins said at the time that people believed there had been a plan in place for the aftermath. Sadly, we all know now that this was not the case, and the results of the lack of planning were disastrous for too many. It is easy to point the finger at Tony Blair, but there were others involved. Alastair Campbell, Geoff Hoon and others in that circle of friends, or of decision makers, should take this on board as well.

Right hon. and hon. Members will be aware of the poem by Rudyard Kipling entitled “Tommy”, and I should like to read out two verses from it—the second and the fifth. Its theme is just as applicable today as it was in its time.

“I went into a theatre as sober as could be, They gave a drunk civilian room, but ‘adn’t none for me; They sent me to the gallery or round the music-’alls, But when it comes to fightin’, Lord! they’ll show me in the stalls!

For it’s Tommy this, an’ Tommy that, an’ ‘Tommy, wait outside’; But it’s ‘Special train for Atkins’ when the trooper’s on the tide The troopship’s on the tide, my boys, the troopship’s on the tide, O it’s ‘Special train for Atkins’ when the trooper’s on the tide.”

And:

“You talk o’ better food for us, an’ schools, an’ fires, an’ all: We’ll wait for extra rations if you treat us rational. Don’t mess about the cook-room slops, but prove it to our face The Widow’s Uniform is not the soldier-man’s disgrace.

For it’s Tommy this, an’ Tommy that, an’ ‘Chuck him out, the brute!’ But it’s ‘Saviour of ’is country’ when the guns begin to shoot; An’ it’s Tommy this, an’ Tommy that, an’ anything you please; An’ ‘Tommy ain’t a bloomin’ fool—you bet that Tommy sees!’

We have a duty to look after our veterans, and to ensure that those who have served this country well are looked after.

The Iraqi vulnerable persons resettlement scheme was set up after the war, but it has not delivered the capacity that it should have. The current reflections on Iraq are important, but they will have no impact on the ongoing dire situation in that country. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) made the point yesterday—I shall make it again today—that many Yazidis, Shi’as, Syrian Catholics, Protestants, Sabean-Mandaean and Sunnis, as well as many others, continue to be targeted by Daesh on the basis of their identity. Around 3.3 million have been displaced due to the instability in Iraq, and many minority groups are on the verge of disappearance.

In June, the United Nations independent international commission of inquiry on Syria determined that Daesh had committed genocide against the Yazidis. Around 90% of Yazidis are Iraqi. Despite this evidence, the Gateway, Children at Risk and Mandate resettlement schemes, which are not nationality-specific, have taken in only a very low number of Iraqis—up to 300 in 2015. While some Iraqis might fit all the criteria under the
current Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, they are not eligible for asylum in the UK because they are not Syrian nationals.

I want to call for a modest expansion of the SVPRS and the Iraqi vulnerable persons resettlement scheme to permit Iraqis who fit the SVPRS vulnerability criteria to qualify for asylum in the UK. A modest expansion is particularly pertinent, because Iraqis have suffered as much as their Syrian counterparts at the hands of Daesh, and the death toll in Iraq continues to rise. The UK cannot absolve itself from assisting Iraqis, and making them eligible for resettlement in the UK, with the UNHCR’s recommendation, is the least we can do.

We have heard about the mistakes, and we can learn from them and move forward. We can make the world a better place for our soldiers to serve in, with the uniform and equipment that they should have and with the support for veterans and their families that they need when they come home. Let us learn from the Chilcot report, and from those mistakes, and move forward.

12.35 pm

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for this opportunity to speak in the debate. The Chilcot report, published last week, made sobering reading. Many things have been said already on the issue—I shall not repeat them—and the chief protagonists at the time have received, in my view, fair criticism. I am in the fortunate position of both having been in the Army at the time of the Iraq war and now being a Member of this place. I did not serve in combat in Iraq; my theatre was another unpopular war, in Afghanistan.

At the time of the Iraq invasion, the Army was a strange place to be, particularly if you were just beginning your career. It is difficult to be positive about a mission when over 1 million people march against your deployment just before you go. But it is testament to the character and professionalism of the UK armed forces that the initial operation was the success that it was, despite crucial losses—including from my own regiment on 23 March 2003, when Ian Seymour, Les Hehir and Welly Evans of 29 Commando were killed during the insertion into southern Iraq.

However, what happened following the initial operation in that country and for the following seven years—indeed, perhaps right up to today—has been a tragedy for Iraq. I visited the country last autumn and met the President. It remains a place of extreme violence, heavy corruption and deep division. It was a challenge to return from a visit to Baghdad with much of a sense of optimism, although recent changes in the Iraqi security forces, and the international coalition’s mammoth efforts in the fight against Daesh, give real cause for hope, and I want to pay tribute to all UK forces engaged in that fight today.

How did we get to this point? I absolutely understand the public rage. The actions of some of those at the top of Government at the time—and yes, at the top of the military—were negligent. I am concerned, however, that the public’s fixation on Tony Blair could make us miss some of the learning points that must be taken from Sir John’s comprehensive work. Those learning points are the whole point of this process. It was encouraging to hear the Prime Minister who left office yesterday say that it would be impossible for these events to happen again today because of the structures he and his team had put in place, and I commend him and the Secretary of State for Defence for that.

However, there is a deeper issue here—one of basic moral courage—that I have found most distressing. In the military, that moral courage can be a rarer and therefore more treasured commodity in an organisation configured to imbue and nurture physical courage in the face of the enemy. That ability to stand up for your men in the face of a seemingly unstoppable sequence of events, and to speak truth to power, is an integral part of the military’s duty to this nation. We drill it into our subordinates and we preach it to anyone who will listen. So where was that courage in the build-up to this disastrous war?

It is inconceivable to me to allow a political Administration in this country to hamper preparations for war because they did not politically want to be seen to be making those preparations. It is inconceivable to me to allow soldiers out of patrol bases and into contact with the enemy without body armour, not as a tactical decision or a result of enemy action against a supply route, but simply because of bad planning. It is inconceivable to me continually to allow patrolling in Snatch Land Rovers when they were known to provide no protection whatever to our men and women against a well known and obvious threat from improvised explosive devices. But those things happened, and they directly cost UK military lives. These lessons must not be missed amid the almost visceral fixation of hatred on Tony Blair, lest we do a further disservice to our men and women who serve.

The Prime Minister does not make tactical decisions. She does not plan logistics; she is advised by those who do. I cannot in all honesty conceive of a time when I, as a very junior and insignificant commander in another unpopular war in Afghanistan, would ever have sanctioned an operation knowing that it lacked the equipment required to protect my men from a threat that I clearly knew about, because I was not prepared to say no. I find it hard, as do many of my cohort, to understand why that was sanctioned, yet it was.

We as a military betrayed the individuals who lost their life in this conflict as a direct result of equipment shortages. That is the point that really sticks in the craw. The political arguments and the strategic comings and goings will be debated ad infinitum, as they must be, to ensure that we do not make the same mistakes again, but the military and tactical lessons must also be learned. What happened in Iraq had a profound effect on my whole generation of junior commanders in the military. We grew up with a deep sense of distrust in our superiors and we preach it to anyone who will listen. That ability to stand up for your men in the face of a seemingly unstoppable sequence of events, and to speak truth to power, is an integral part of the military’s duty to this nation. We drill it into our subordinates and we preach it to anyone who will listen. So where was that courage in the build-up to this disastrous war?

Finally, I want to speak strongly against the idea that the lives of British servicemen and women were somehow wasted in this war, or that they died for nothing. I simply cannot reconcile it with my not insignificant personal experience of seeing my comrades in combat that lives lost in the pursuit of protecting the freedoms and privileges that we enjoy in this country were lost in vain. For the families, many of whom I know intimately,
nothing—no mission, no cause—can be worth losing a loved one. As a soldier, however, I feel that I must represent the intimate conversations we shared, and the deep motivations that we fell back on to get through yet another day in the sweat, heat, blood and dust of these recent wars. We soldiers are drawn from all backgrounds, races, religions, colours and creeds. We all have different views—usually much more informed than anyone gives us credit for, and no doubt crafted by our own personal experiences—but we wear one uniform, with one Union Jack on our sleeve. We sign up to the same core value of protecting this nation, in exactly the same tradition of immense sacrifices as our forefathers, who wore the same cap badges and were under the same flag.

The truth is that, when a soldier leaves his patrol base in the morning, he is not thinking about how his particular contribution that day will help to advance the cause of Iraq’s future prosperity or Afghanistan’s place in the world. He is not thinking about whether we should have believed the dossier about weapons of mass destruction or whether he is going to stumble upon Osama’s house in downtown Sangin. He is thinking of calling his wife later, of covering his arcs and of trying not to blink in case he misses something. He is making sure he has some spare batteries for his radio. He is more frightened of letting his mates down than he is of the enemy. He is more focused on doing his section, his platoon, or his battalion proud than whether he should be there in the first place. In those endeavours he is showing that courage, that fortitude, that resilience, that commitment, that discipline and that humanity that we all aspire to on the most revealing stage of all: warfare, where norms do not exist and brutality and raw human emotion are everywhere.

We aspire to those things because they are good, because they are noble, because they are to be desired, and young men and women made sacrifices demonstrating such qualities, which those of us who witnessed it and were lucky enough to return refuse to remember as futile. They did make a difference. They saved comrades’ lives through their bravery. They shielded civilians from a brutal enemy intent on showing the very worst of humanity. They improved individual communities and made them safer and better—perhaps not on an overall strategic level, but it was not all a waste. That courage, that resilience, that discipline, that commitment, they are what we must remember from these conflicts. They cannot and must never be forgotten, for that would be an even greater betrayal than the ones laid out in the proceedings of that day to refresh my memory of the atmosphere and culture. It sounds a bit masochistic to watch YouTube recordings of Tony Blair and others making their speeches, but it was important to get a sense of what that day was like because it was such a long time ago. We had to listen to Tony Blair lay out that exaggerated, fabricated case and listen to those flights of fancy. Of course, we now know, because of the Chilcot report, that it was mainly nonsense and invention.

I was here on the day the House voted to go to war, and the Chilcot report offers a bit of closure for some of us. There is a real sense of vindication for people such as me who resolutely opposed the conflict all the way through. I remember that day. It was a horrible, brutal, ugly day. It was a day that should be indelibly imprinted on this House’s collective consciousness. I had a look at the proceedings of that day to refresh my memory of the atmosphere and culture. It sounds a bit masochistic to watch YouTube recordings of Tony Blair and others making their speeches, but it was important to get a sense of what that day was like because it was such a long time ago. We had to listen to Tony Blair lay out that exaggerated, fabricated case and listen to those flights of fancy. Of course, we now know, because of the Chilcot report, that it was mainly nonsense and invention.

I was the Chief Whip of what was a small group of SNP MPs in 2003, and I remember observing the Government Whips rounding up the recalcitrant, the doubters and those who were trying to make up their minds. Let us never forget that that Labour Government imposed a harsh three-line Whip on their Members that day. Really good women and men were dragged into the Aye Lobby to support that fabricated case and their flawed Prime Minister. The House passed the motion by 412 to 149. I was among the 149 and it is the proudest vote of my 15 years in this House.

It was a vote that more or less defined and characterised the previous Labour Government—just as the vote to leave Europe will characterise this Conservative Government. There are parallels if we look underneath what happened. Both were a reckless gamble. There was no planning. This was what transpired when it comes to Brexit, and there was no planning, as we have learned from Chilcot, by the Labour Government and the rest of our allies for what transpired once they embarked upon that
campaign. It is curious when big events characterise particular Governments and the previous Labour Government will forever be characterised by Iraq.

However, the war was all about one man. My apologies to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View, but it is about Tony Blair. There is no escaping the personal association of the former Prime Minister with what transpired in Iraq. It will follow him to the grave and will be on his headstone. Such is his association with the Iraq conflict that he might as well have it tattooed on his forehead. It was about that man and about how he approached the war.

I have listened carefully to many of the speeches from honourable colleagues who were Members of this House on that day in 2003. I think we can group them into three categories, and I will try to help the House by defining what those are. I am in the first category, which is those who voted against the war, took a consistent line and did not accept for a minute the nonsensical case presented to us. Today, we feel in a pretty good place. I am looking around at some of my honourable colleagues who were in the House that day, particularly the Liberal Democrats. I pay tribute to the Liberal Democrats, who had our place back in 2003, for the way they led the case against the war. [Interruption.] I also pay tribute to the Labour Members—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) can take it easy, as I acknowledge the Labour Members who opposed their Whip. As he said, it was the biggest rebellion during that Government. I pay tribute to those Members, too, because they saw through this and were prepared to reject the fabricated, nonsensical case from the Prime Minister. They did the right thing, and I congratulate them, too.

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): On a brief point of information, I should say that historically this was British political history’s biggest rebellion within a governing party. Some 122 Back-Bench colleagues in the Labour party voted on the motion that the case was not proven; only 119 voted with the Government—under immense pressure from the Whips and others, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding us of that, and he is right. This is why it is important to set out the context of what that day was like. It was a horrible, ugly, dreadful day, and we can never get around some of the things that went on.

Let me get on to the Conservatives, as the second category is mainly comprised of them. I have listened to several Conservative Members. I cannot recall which one made this case earlier, but there is a sense among Conservative Members that they were misled. They range from those who are angry and upset about the way they were duped by the former Prime Minister, to those like the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr Cameron), who resigned as Prime Minister yesterday, who are a bit more morose and philosophical about it. They say, “A Prime Minister was giving us information. We had to go along with it because it was a Prime Minister and of course he will know all this.” What the Conservative party failed to do—it absolutely failed to do this on that day—was hold that Labour Government to account; it did not question and it was not inquisitive. It did not look at the case presented to it and say, “Hold on a minute; this is a lot of nonsense.” It should have known—the rest of the country knew this was wrong.

Some 100,000 people marched through Glasgow—I was at the front of that procession with my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond)—and 1 million people in London marched against that war. More than that, there was an atmosphere in the nation among the public, who just knew profoundly that something was wrong with this case. They knew instinctively that what they were hearing night after night from Tony Blair and all his cronies was uncomfortable—there was something wrong. The Conservatives should have picked that up. Had they done their job, we would not have been presented with this utter failure and disaster.

Let me now deal with those in the third and last category, and I have listened to some of them today. They seem almost still to be making the case for war, as if that was somehow justified and right. They point to all sorts of things, saying, “The world’s a better place without Saddam.” Well, of course it is, but what a price we have paid. What world do these people live on? We have seen half a million people dead; a region destabilised; a generation radicalised; foreign policy discredited like never before—and it is unlikely that we will ever restore that faith in foreign policy again; and distrust in politics. That was a key point when the public fell out of trust with what we did in this House. And what about the place where Saddam was removed? Of course, we all welcome that, but no one, least of all the Iraqis who have to live with the consequences, would start to suggest that Iraq is a better place now than in 2002.

Clive Efford: The hon. Gentleman just said that this decision led to the public losing faith in this House, but many of the accusations that were made against the Government are not found in the Chilcot report. Those led to people coming to that conclusion about this House. Does he not accept that that day was difficult for all of us? Even those who voted against were not certain that we were making the right decision. We cannot be so exact about our judgment call on that day. Surely he can accept that those who voted in favour did so believing that they were doing the right thing. At least he could be graceful about that.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that, as it brings me on to my next point, which is that we should look at the case for the war. I believe he was in the House in 2003—

Clive Efford indicated assent.

Pete Wishart: The hon. Gentleman, like me, will therefore have been recalled to Parliament in September 2002. We would march to the Members’ Lobby and take out what has become known as “the dodgy dossier”. Did he, for a minute, believe the fabricated nonsense it contained? The case for war was appalling. As we find out from Chilcot now, most of it came from the post-doctoral thesis of a student called Ibrahim al-Marashi. I have just read a report from him, and he is now saying that his evidence and his post-doctoral work were doctored by the Government at the time. That was the case for war—the hon. Gentleman had to make a judgement on it, as did I—and it was nonsensical. It was fabricated.
and it was a flight of fancy, but it was what we were asked to go to war on. It was a disgrace. This was like a comedy sketch for a case to go to war on: it was more sexy up than we want our starlet embarking on their first video. That is what I would say about the dodgy dossier. It was an appalling document and this House should never have been taken in for a minute with the rubbish included in it.

I listened to Tony Blair last week and I was appalled at what I heard in his response: the lack of contrition; the half-hearted apology, which will probably do nothing other than incense the victims; the flights of fancy still there, almost with an attempt to rewrite several sections of the Chilcot report; and the failure to acknowledge the enormity of what was unleashed. What happened was appalling, and so several things now have to happen.

My view is that we are not at the end of the process, despite having had 1 million-odd words; there is still a journey to go in this sorry saga in which this House has been involved. We are not at the conclusion in terms of what happened in Iraq. That is mainly because of a point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) have raised: Chilcot was not able to judge on the legality of this conflict. We still have that extra mile to go to see whether this was an illegal war. Until we get that verdict, big issues will remain outstanding on the assessment of the conflict. There are further journeys to go on, which may disappoint hon. Members who have waited years and years for the Chilcot report.

The second thing that must happen is that those who are responsible for the biggest foreign policy disaster ever—this is bigger than Suez—must be held to account for the decisions they made, for the things they did in the course of the conflict and for how it was pursued. I overwhelmingly support the case that the chief architect—the designer—of the Iraq war, Mr Tony Blair, should be brought in front of this House to face the charges that have been suggested. I hope that the House gets that opportunity to discuss this, because the public expect us to go on from here. They do not want us, after all this time, to let it go. The only people who have lost their jobs in the course of the conflict are two BBC journalists. Is that not an appalling way to leave things? That has to be addressed and I believe that there is a real public desire to move to the next stage now, which is holding people to account. I hope we do that.

I hated every minute of the debate about the Iraq war—the build-up to it and the post-conflict resolution. It was dreadful; it was this House at its worst. We must never get there again. If there is one thing we can take from this, it is to learn lessons and never to do this again. We must hold the people responsible to account. We must apologise for that conflict and start to try to move on from all of this. Let us vow that we will never do something like the Iraq war ever again in this Parliament.

12.59 pm

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): Many important lessons will emerge over the coming months and years, and of course deep sympathy must persist for the people of Iraq and the families of the members of our outstanding armed forces who fell in the line of duty. I shall focus on the Iraq inquiry’s immediate lessons for the leadership of our country, in which this House has such a vital role.

First, may I offer some historical perspective? It is worth noting some similarities between the times that we are living through now and the last period of our recent history that was similarly defined by what I would describe as political sclerosis. During the first half of the 20th century, we witnessed the collapse of empires—the Ottoman empire and our own; we saw the failure of an intergovernmental institution—the League of Nations; and we endured economic turbulence and depression. Such dramatic geopolitical change was fuelled by remarkable technological change, with the mass transit of people and advanced weapons of war, along with large armies, which resulted in appalling human cost in two world wars.

Today we are experiencing similar geopolitical change with an expansionist China, a resurgent Russia, and a socially unstable and perhaps more parochial United States of America. We have the mass transit of data rather than of people, and globalisation, which brings with it opportunities and costs. Drones have replaced tanks and the potential for space-based weaponry looms. Within the context of this dramatic change, the new Government must set their path. A crucial lesson from the Iraq inquiry’s report is that we have to be better prepared to provide great leadership at historic tipping points for our nation and for our world.

It was not wrong to wish to depose Saddam Hussein, but the way in which the US-led coalition went about it has had effects that were predicted by many experts. Those effects were perfectly foreseeable, and they were catastrophic for the Iraqi people and also for our own regional interests. Our own country’s leadership at every level, from the Prime Minister down, was far too weak to deliver a good outcome.

I note that we are again at a critical moment—this time in the history of our own nation and continent. Delivering a good long-term outcome once again depends on this House supplying the best possible leadership now. The ties that have bound our nation, our communities and our people at home and abroad are severely strained, and some are breaking. Our people mistrust those whom they have elected to represent their interests and lead our nation. As in 2003, decisions taken quickly today will have enormous ramifications over the coming decades, like the proverbial flap of the butterfly’s wings in one part of the world that creates a hurricane in another.

It is at such critical moments that we require great leadership: leadership with the experience and perspective to see our nation’s role clearly; leadership with the wisdom and understanding to realise what must be done; and leadership with the vision to set clear direction, the tenacity to deliver a plan, and the good sense to adapt when the context changes, as it always does. In other words, we must not be sclerotic. We need leadership with the selflessness and self-awareness to set the public interest and public service at its heart. We need leadership that will forge our future, not allow us to be carried off on the currents of history to an unknown and unwanted destination.

Our new Prime Minister has taken an important step in setting out her vision for a country that works for everyone. This Government and the previous one have
made welcome changes. Notably, the National Security Council structures enable more strategic decision making in our national interests.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): One of the lessons that I took from the Chilcot report was about a habit that we who have been to Sandhurst had beaten out of us: starting with our aim and retrofitting justifications to suit that. At this time of change in our national leadership, would my hon. Friend welcome any calls that might be made to the new Prime Minister to have a robust team of people to provide counter-narratives at times of key decision making, to test hypotheses and to make sure that when difficult decisions have to be made, that is done in the best possible way?

Dr Lee: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Yes, over the past 10 to 15 years, we have seen too much evidence of the absence of people speaking truth to power in the room that matters. I am hopeful that the elevation of our new Prime Minister will usher in a period in which we do listen to experts, and in which we prepare to listen to those who might have a different view and a different approach to the world in which we live.

The changes to the National Security Council are nowhere near enough to guarantee good leadership, which means that we are running an unacceptable level of risk with the security of our people, our nation and our world. The referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union is the latest example. I was no fan of our country’s previous relationship with the EU. It had to change, but holding a referendum on our membership was, I fear, a strategic blunder that will have an adverse impact on our country and our world over the coming years and decades.

We must avoid further such blunders in the future because we face existential threats, and those threats cross borders. They are by their very nature trans-national: international terrorism; radicalisation; a resurgent Russia and an expansionist China that do not respect current borders; cyber-security; organised crime; pandemics; and environmental degradation. Dealing with all these requires us to work with other nations.

We must now set out our geopolitical priorities. We must properly fund the objective to increase our influence around the world. We must revisit government and how it works. Wisdom and experience must be at the heart of our decision making. We must put people who know what they are doing in charge of delivering, and they must stay in their jobs long enough to see them through.

We must urgently overhaul how we identify and nurture future leaders. Our people must once again be able to trust the aims, intentions and abilities of those who lead our country. We have to provide leaders who are worthy of that trust. Earning it back will be painstaking work. This House must insist that we now go much further. Only then will Members be able, in all conscience, to reassure those whom we represent that our nation are worthy of that trust. Earning it back will be painstaking work. Wisdom and experience must be at the heart of our decision making.

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I.7 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I have had a very long involvement with Iraq. For Members who were not here in the 1980s, the 1990s and even the beginning of the 2000s, let me say that I spoke many times in this Chamber about the regime in Iraq. I chaired an organisation called CARDRI—the Committee against Repression and for Democratic Rights in Iraq—which had many members in this country and overseas. We published several books by academics and people who lived in Iraq about the situation in the country. Somebody who is now the representative of Iraq in South Korea would come here almost every other week with a list of people who had been executed at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. Sometimes the accounts of their executions and their torture were so dreadful that I would say to him, “Are you sure this is right?” He would then come back, perhaps a week later, and say, “Yes, it was right, and here’s another long list.” We therefore had no doubt what the situation was in Iraq, and CARDRI existed for a number of years.

When I came back from the European Parliament in 1984, I was asked to chair an organisation called Indict, which was set up with American and Kuwaiti backing. The Kuaitis, of course, had a particular interest in finding those Kuaitis who had been captured during Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait. For many years we searched for those missing people—or their graves.

The organisation had a team of researchers and its aim was to collect evidence against Iraqi war criminals. In particular, we had a list of the 12 most wanted, and we collected detailed evidence about a great number of them because the idea was to bring them to court. By the mid-1990s, a body of law existed that allowed human rights abusers to be brought to court. The development of international law was slow; even though laws existed, their application depended on institutions and Governments that had their own political agendas. A new ruling by the International Court of Justice, for example, blocked indictments of ruling heads of state.

That still left key members of the regime open to indictment, however. We had a great deal of evidence, for example, against Tariq Aziz, who was then the Foreign Minister in Iraq. We also had plenty of evidence against Ali Hassan al-Majid—Chemical Ali. I had meetings with the UN special rapporteur on torture, Max van der Stoel, with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, and with Secretary-General Koﬁ Annan. I also addressed several international conferences and tried to spell out what we were doing.

We needed evidence that would stand up in court, so we dismissed a lot of the evidence that we felt would not. We had guidance from a top human rights barrister, Clare Montgomery, QC. Our researchers worked hard interviewing thousands of people over five or six years to collect testimonies. Once the evidence had been gathered and analysed by our legal team, the role of myself and Indict’s other board members was to persuade lawmakers in the relevant country that there was enough evidence to indict the people concerned. We came close to a prosecution in Belgium, but it changed its laws at the last minute because someone had tried to indict Israeli leader Ariel Sharon.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The right hon. Lady is trying to persuade us that Saddam Hussein was a vile dictator. We all accept that, but that...
was not the case for war. The case for war was based on weapons of mass destruction. She argued strongly in favour of the war. Has she changed her mind on the basis of the evidence?

Ann Clwyd: When I come to the relevant section in my speech, the hon. Gentleman will get his answer.

We went to Switzerland, Norway and Belgium. We had a good case in Norway, and I travelled there several times to meet senior law officers. However, just as in Britain, there were lots of warm words, but there was no action. We were therefore trying hard to avoid a war; we thought there was an alternative. We tried to make the case—I made it in this Chamber over many years, and the hon. Gentleman would have heard it had he been here—that there were alternatives. Unfortunately, all the authorities prevaricated, and the issue dragged on without getting anywhere.

Meanwhile, our main funders, the Americans, were having a change of heart. The Clinton Administration had originally been enthusiastic, wanting us to campaign in the US as well as in Europe, but they suddenly changed their mind. They had moved to a policy of containment, not indictment, so our activities no longer really fitted in with their plans. However, the organisation had been set up in this country, so we continued collecting the evidence.

We turned our attention, in particular, to Tariq Aziz, because of his involvement in the taking of British hostages. People forget that British hostages were taken in Kuwait, and we never had proper answers about why they were there and why their plane landed there. Saddam Hussein had already taken Kuwait, and those people were taken as human shields.

I presented our evidence to the Attorney General, Lord Williams of Mostyn. I had several meetings with him and continually pressured members of his team to take action, because they were not moving fast enough. They kicked their heels for a number of years, and our top barrister could not understand why, given the evidence that we had presented. We had as much evidence as we could possibly need. Apart from getting a signed confession from Saddam Hussein in his own blood, there was nothing further, legally, we could have done.

I would occasionally spot Lord Williams at Westminster, and I would take off after him, chasing him down the corridors. He would frequently joke that he was having to duck into the gorgeous offices that One day he said, “I’ve got good news for Indict.” He said he was going to refer the case against Tariq Aziz to Scotland Yard. I looked at him and said, “You’re kicking it into the long grass,” but he denied that that was the case. The Indict team, which was obviously made up mainly of Iraqis, duly visited a Chief Superintendent Bunn in New Scotland Yard. We talked about the evidence we had and offered to help him by providing more, but we never heard a single word back. That is understandable in some ways; it was not Scotland Yard’s remit, and it had neither the resources nor the expertise, and certainly not the interest.

We came in for some ridicule from the British press—the typical tabloid fare, with cartoons of British bobbies apprehending Saddam Hussein—but a good opportunity was missed. I make that point because there were alternatives, but those alternatives, for whatever reasons, were not pursued in the way that I and many other Members would have wished.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), who was of great assistance when we were looking at many of these matters. He was a very wise counsel, and he assisted the Iraqis in many ways.

I became aware of human rights atrocities in Iraq before I was a politician, in the 1970s. I met Iraqi students in Cardiff, and I am sure some of my Scottish friends will have met Iraqi students in Scotland. Some of those students had been imprisoned. I met a couple from Basra. One of them—he was a student activist—had been in prison and gone through a mock execution. I came to learn later on that that was only the tip of the iceberg.

In 1991, when I was the shadow Secretary of State for International Development, I stood up in Parliament and described what I had seen in the mountains of Iraq and Iran when the Kurds fled Saddam’s helicopter gunships. Those scenes were appalling and typical of the attacks made by the Iraqi regime on Iraqis. Sometime later, I met an Iraqi who made the point that Saddam had killed hundreds of thousands of his own people. He said, “The biggest weapon of mass destruction was Saddam. Why did it take so long for him to be removed?” Many Kurds were killed during the genocidal Anfal campaign, including as a result of the barbarous use of chemical weapons in Halabja.

In 1988, I took some women Members of all parties to a London hospital to see a number of the horribly burned victims. Many people were killed brutally, in cold blood, in a maze of prison and torture chambers all over the country. Repression, abuse, ethnic cleansing and extra-judicial killings continued right up until 2003.

Saddam, without doubt, was a serious threat to domestic, regional and global stability. I had hoped that the international community could remove or neutralise him without force, but sanctions failed, international indictment never took place and UN Security Council resolutions were ignored time after time. All had been tried; all had failed. So from 1997 to 2003, I worked to get Saddam and leading members of his regime prosecuted under international law for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, on the basis of rock-solid witness testimony. The evidence was finally used in the trials of Saddam, Tariq Aziz and others when they eventually stood trial in Baghdad. I was very pleased to be there to witness some of those trials. I knew that our evidence was being used; I saw it in the rooms behind the chamber where they were being tried.

In February 2003, the Kurds were terrified that chemical weapons would be used against them again. I saw the rockets in mountains on the Iraqi-Kurdish border. From 2003 onwards, more secrets of this evil and despotic regime were revealed. I stood on a huge mound in the open air, on several acres in al-Hillah, near Babylon, where about 10,000 bodies were being disinterred from a mass grave, mostly Shí’í Muslims.

On one of more than 20 visits to Iraq as special envoy on human rights, I opened the first genocide museum in Kurdistan. It was snowing, the sky was black and people crammed into the building, where their relatives had been tortured, many to death. There were photos of
support shown by Tony Blair, and the British Government and result of Iraqis themselves. We will always remain grateful for the Iraqis murdered as a result of his actions.

We are still finding the mass graves of the nearly one million against the Iraqi population as well as neighbouring countries.

and had instructed organised campaigns of genocide, torture, evidence available at that time.

response to the Iraqi people and to protect them, on the basis of world, and we, as representatives of the Iraqi opposition, believe minorities that make up the Iraq) and most of the international Iraqi opposition (including Kurds, Arabs, Shia, and all other minorities that make up the Iraq) and most of the international community.

The Iraqi opposition lobbied Governments throughout the world, and we, as representatives of the Iraqi opposition, believe that Prime Minister Blair and President Bush were acting in response to the Iraqi people and to protect them, on the basis of evidence available at that time.

There was concrete evidence that Saddam Hussein was complicit and had instructed organised campaigns of genocide, torture, war, ethnic cleansing and use of chemical/biological weapons against the Iraqi population as well as neighbouring countries. We are still finding the mass graves of the nearly one million Iraqis murdered as a result of his actions.

Although Iraq currently has its problems, I believe they are the result of Iraqis themselves. We will always remain grateful for the support shown by Tony Blair, and the British Government and British Parliament at that time.”

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have the utmost respect for the right hon. Lady for all the work she has done over the years to try to get evidence against this regime. It is incredible work, and I pay great tribute to her. I have one question. I have never really understood where the chemical weapons went—where did they go?

Ann Clwyd: That is a very interesting question. I can only speculate, as I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has done. There is evidence that some of them went to Syria, but there are still unanswered questions. The Kurds, in particular, truly believed that there were weapons of mass destruction. I myself never used that argument for intervention, because I did not know the answers. However, I did use the humanitarian argument, because I thought it was important that the world should not turn its face away from the horrors that were going on in Iraq.

I want to make a plea for continuing engagement with Iraq. The needs of the Iraqis are great. I, personally, have continued my association with Iraqis and with the Kurds. I am very well aware of their problems at this time, particularly the continuing threat of ISIS and Daesh. It is not true to say that such people did not exist in Iraq before the war. They existed in Kurdistan, for example, under the name of Ansar al-Islam, and at that time the Americans managed to get them out. We still need to protect the minorities of Iraq—there are so many of them. We have a responsibility to continue to assist that country in any way we can.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. To try to accommodate all remaining colleagues, there will now be a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, with immediate effect. [Interruption]

I hardly think that is a cause for the exhalation of air; 10 minutes is perfectly adequate. I know that what colleagues have to say is immensely important, but I dare say they can do it in 10 minutes each.

1.27 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): So we now have the Chilcot report. Seven long years we have waited for this report of 2.6 million words. It has cost a huge amount of money. After seven years, Sir John Chilcot comes up with this sentence:

“We have concluded that the UK chose to join the invasion of Iraq before the peaceful options for disarmament had been exhausted.”

It took seven years to come up with that conclusion. It took so long that one of the five members of the inquiry actually died during the proceedings. I pay tribute to the speeches that were made yesterday by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), and my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), and to today’s speech by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart).

I was absolutely sickened when I saw the interview with the former Labour Prime Minister on television. I thought that if anyone deserved an Oscar, it was him. After everything that we now know has happened, instead of apologising like the noble Lord Prescott, the then Deputy Prime Minister, who has admitted that he got it wrong and made huge mistakes, the then Prime Minister told us that if he was presented with the same facts—what a joke!—he would do absolutely the same again.

I am delighted that we are having a two-day debate on the Chilcot report, but to be frank, the timing is not great, because both the major parties are distracted by the question of who will lead them. At least the Conservatives have come to a conclusion on that, but I have no doubt that Conservative Members are today distracted by the question of who will become a Minister. Given how distracted we have been over the past two days, the Chilcot report deserves better scrutiny, because it has affected the whole world, not just the future of the Labour and Conservative parties. I am very disappointed that the two Prime Ministers did not intervene and say to Sir John Chilcot, “Seven years is absolutely ridiculous. We should have had the report much more quickly.”

I want to draw on five elements of the report. The first centres on the misrepresentation of French declarations relating to their potential veto of any further UN resolution. Sir Stephen Wall, Mr Blair’s European Union adviser, told the Iraq inquiry that, following Chirac’s statement, he heard Mr Blair telling Alastair Campbell, the director of communications at No. 10, to play the anti-French card with The Sun and others. Well, that is nice, isn’t it?
Secondly, on statements relating to suspected Iraqi stockpiles of chemical weapons, Mr Blair gave a speech that gave the impression that the overwhelming evidence supported the view that Iraq had retained significant stocks of chemical weapons, in material breach of United Nations resolution 1441. In reality, the report did not claim that Iraq possessed banned weapons, merely that material was “unaccounted for”.

The third element I want to draw on centres on statements relating to suspected Iraqi stockpiles of biological weapons. Mr Blair confused the distinction between biological weapons existing and their being unaccounted for, and the evidence did not support his representations to the House that Iraq had significant stockpiles of viable biological weapons.

Fourthly, on statements relating to Hussein Kamel’s evidence regarding Iraq’s chemical and biological weapons programme, by selectively quoting from General Kamel’s evidence and by omitting his claims that Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction programme had been closed in 1991, Mr Blair misled this House of Commons as to the extent of Iraq’s chemical and biological weapons programme.

Finally, on statements relating to the consequences of the Iraq war on the threat of terrorism to the United Kingdom, Baroness Manningham-Buller—head of MI5, no less, at the time of the Iraq war—gave evidence to the Iraq inquiry regarding her department’s assessment of the effect of joining the war on the risk of terrorism.

Responding to the question of whether United Kingdom participation in the Iraq war would increase the threat of terrorism in the UK, she said:

“I think you will see from our report in early 2003, which is reflected in the JIC reporting, that the threat from Al-Qaeda would increase”.

She went on to explain that she thought that the Iraq war “is highly significant and the JIC assessments that I have reminded myself of say that...our involvement in Iraq radicalised, for want of a better word, a whole generation of young people, some British citizens—not a whole generation, a few among a generation—who were—saw our involvement in Iraq, on top of our involvement in Afghanistan, as being an attack on Islam.”

It is clear from the evidence provided to the Iraq inquiry that Mr Blair was made aware of the evidence that the war would increase the risk of terrorist activity in the United Kingdom, and that he misled the House about how the conflict would impact on terrorist activities.

How many times have we heard someone say today, “There are lessons to be learned from the Chilcot report”? Since I have been in the House, I have seen at first hand how most significant political careers end in tears, so I am not sure how those lessons will actually be learned. My hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet has said that he hopes that you would look favourably, Mr Speaker, on a request for a debate on the subject of contempt of Parliament.

Many current Members were not here in 2003, but we owe it to everyone to make sure that we put right the wrong for which we were responsible, and hold the former Prime Minister, the then leader of the Labour party, to account for the way in which he misled this Parliament.

1.36 pm

Ian C. Lucas: Wrexham: I listened with great interest to the speech of the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess). I was here in 2003 and I am one of the people who got it right. I sat on the Back Bench—I was not called to speak, but I heard the entire debate—and listened to the evidence presented to me by the then Prime Minister. I made my decision based on the evidence, and I believed then, as I believe now, that I made the right decision. I know that the report has taken an awful long time to arrive, but it is very good and valuable.

I want to talk about the context and where we found ourselves in 2003. It is very important that we remember what happened on 9/11 in 2001, because much of what we discussed in the period leading up to the war was seen through the prism of the attack on the World Trade Centre. As a new MP, I visited the United Nations in New York in November 2001. It was an extraordinary time and the visit was a moving experience, but we could also feel the entirely understandable strength of feeling in the United States about what had happened. That resulted in military intervention in Afghanistan, which was broadly supported, not just in this House, but right across the world.

One of the most extraordinary things that I saw at the UN in November 2001 was a committee chaired by UK Special Representative Sir Jeremy Greenstock taking evidence on and auditing terrorist activity in countries across the middle east. For a very short period before the Iraq war, there was a feeling and a sentiment that we could make some progress in dealing with international terrorism. Unfortunately, however, a linkage was very quickly developed between what happened in New York in September 2001 and the issue of Iraq. There were people who developed an agenda trying to draw together what happened at the World Trade Centre and the problem of Iraq. That was in the air, and was referred to in the various discussions that we had. So although there was no direct evidence of any links at all between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda, there was usage of a broad description of international terrorism to justify the steps that were being taken.

John Nicolson: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that it was risible to try to associate the secular Saddam Hussein with fundamentalist Islamists, given that the two had a mutual loathing for one another?

Ian C. Lucas: That is absolutely right. It would have been very convenient for those who wanted to take military action in Iraq if they could have made a linkage, but clearly there was none. In all the discussions we had in the lead-up to the war, no linkage was established.

Immediately after the vote in 2003, there was, for me, a terrible sense of inevitability about the military action in Iraq. I am reminded of the fact that the historian A. J. P. Taylor talked about the importance of railway
Ian C. Lucas: Theatements at the beginning of the first world war. When approaching the vote in March 2003, I had that idea in my mind. It seemed to me that we were on a road that was leading to an inevitable conclusion. Very interestingly, paragraph 830 of Sir John Chilcot’s report states: “A military timetable should not be allowed to dictate a diplomatic timetable”.

I believe that, at the time of the vote, that is exactly what happened. I recall very well the work of Hans Blix and the UN weapons inspectors. I watched Hans Blix very closely in the build-up to March 2003, when I was deciding how to vote. It seemed to me that he was doing his best to establish the position on weapons of mass destruction. On 18 March 2003, he was asking for more time. On the basis of the information that I heard in the debate, I thought it was right to give him more time. That is why I voted in the way that I did and why I supported the amendment.

Interestingly, a couple of years after the vote, I attended a meeting in the House of Commons at which Hans Blix spoke. I recall that he said that, in March 2003, he believed that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. I had not known that on the day that I cast my vote, and it is extraordinary that he said it. It seems that he had a similar view to the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair: he had a genuine, honest belief. The difference was that he wanted more time to investigate it further, and the Prime Minister did not allow us more time so to do. In March 2003, the drum beat to war quickened, and that is why military action happened. That is not a good reason for military action.

The then US Government, acting in the long shadow of 9/11, included people with an agenda to intervene in the middle east. They used that context to justify the intervention. In the immediate post-9/11 period, they made some really bad judgment calls. In Iran, moderate forces had been holding sway before 2003. George Bush then made his dreadful “axis of evil” speech, which was part of the process that shattered any chance of a unified response to 9/11. The alienation of Iran also had a massive negative impact on the post-war period in Iraq and undermined progress towards reconstruction. It was a massive mistake for the UK Government and Tony Blair to support the Bush and US agenda at that time.

I am quite certain that Tony Blair acted in good faith. In March 2003, I think he believed, like Hans Blix, that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction. I believe that it was through UK insistence that the US agreed to involve the UN as much as it did. However, when the UN weapons inspectors asked for more time in March 2003, the allies should have given it to them. As Sir John Chilcot concludes at paragraph 339 of the report: “At the time of the parliamentary vote of 18 March, diplomatic options had not been exhausted. The point had not been reached where military action was the last resort.”

On the information available to me, a Back Bencher, at the time, I voted against the Labour Whip for the first time, along with many of my Labour colleagues. The Liberal Democrats—the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) is sitting next to me—the nationalist parties and some Conservatives did the same. The official Conservative Opposition, however, supported military action in a largely unquestioning way.

Clive Efford: I wonder whether my hon. Friend’s recollection is the same as mine. My recollection is that, prior to the debate and the statement by the Prime Minister, which was criticised by the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), the Conservatives had been calling for action earlier, before that evidence was presented. For them to turn up now and say that it was all because of what Tony Blair said on that day is a little disingenuous.

Ian C. Lucas: I would not go quite that far, because I am more kindly than my hon. Friend. My recollection is that the Leader of the Opposition got this completely and utterly wrong. The official Opposition failed in their constitutional duty to ask the difficult questions and hold the Government to account. It was left to other parties in the House and the Labour Back Benchers to hold the Government to account. The failure of the official Opposition to challenge the Prime Minister and the Government effectively made his wrong decision easier. This is a big lesson for the official Opposition today.

There were a number of things that the Government did right on the Iraqi issue. For example, they did hold a vote. It should be remembered that that was, I think, the first time that that had happened.

Sir David Amess: I think the hon. Gentleman is being slightly disingenuous in this. There were only 165 Conservative Members of Parliament. It is not as though we were a huge Opposition. I think he is slightly misrepresenting things.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should not use the word “disingenuous”. The hon. Member for Southend West thinks that there has been a misrepresentation, which I am sure he thinks is inadvertent. We will leave it there.

Ian C. Lucas: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I took no offence and understand the hon. Gentleman’s point. It is difficult to be a small Opposition. None the less, it is important to ask the difficult questions. I am afraid that the Leader of the Opposition got this completely wrong.

As I mentioned, the Government did do some things right. They made statements on a regular basis and we asked a lot of questions. That changed the nature of the relationship between Government and Parliament on questions of military action. We have seen the consequences of that in the more recent decision on Libya and Syria.

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): The decision to commit to the US neo-con agenda of an invasion of Iraq was, and remains, the biggest political misjudgement in foreign policy in my political lifetime. I gave evidence to the Chilcot inquiry. The inquiry was an opportunity that the former Prime Minister Tony Blair could have seized to say, “I made a serious misjudgement.
I was wrong, but at the time I thought I was doing the right thing.” Instead, we had equivocal apologies that were really about the circumstances. “Sorry that people got injured and that some people died.” That was not enough. Had the former Prime Minister taken that opportunity, he would have healed not only himself, but a fault line in his party and the hurt that has been suffered, to some extent, by the nation and by people across the globe. I am sorry that he missed the opportunity to say that because these things will remain with us for as long as he fails to do so.

The two biggest rebellions within a governing party in British political history took place in February and March 2003. It will not surprise you, Mr Speaker, to hear that I want to talk about the parliamentary aspect. Parliament could have done better, even in those circumstances. It was used and abused by Executive power in the most blatant way, and I will mention some examples of that later.

Mr Alistair Carmichael: I recall the hon. Gentleman’s role in formulating a cross-party amendment that was put to the House, and I expect to agree with most of what he will say about the role of Parliament. Before he continues, will he reflect on the fact that Parliament did one thing perfectly at that time? It is to the eternal credit of Michael Martin, the then Speaker, that he selected the hon. Gentleman’s amendment over that tabled by the official Opposition, which would have resulted in no material difference.

Mr Allen: I have some things to say about the then Speaker—I will get on to that fairly quickly—but first I will set the context. There was growing unease, certainly from the time of the Crawford talks between Prime Minister Blair and the US President George W. Bush, that we were being set on an inevitable path. It was thought that this was not something that anyone was going to change; it was something that had been agreed and was going to happen, to coin a phrase, “whatever”. That was the thing that frustrated and annoyed parliamentarians. This was a preordained decision, and it was going to happen. That was why I and many, many others felt that, as Chilcot said, this was not hindsight; it was going to happen. That was the thing that frustrated and annoyed parliamentarians. This was a preordained decision, and it was going to happen. That was why I and many, many others felt that, as Chilcot said, this was not hindsight; it was farsight. Anyone who had read in the history books about the religious and tribal composition of Iraq realised that action could set off an incendiary device in the middle east, which was already, even then, in some difficulties.

People talk about the debates and what a wonderful thing they were for Parliament, but we had to drag the Government kicking and screaming to a debate. I wrote to Speaker Martin and suggested the recall of the House. He said that of course we could put our suggestion to the House, when it returned. We therefore would have had to wait for the House to return in order to get the House recalled at an earlier point, and I felt that that was probably not the then Chair’s finest moment.

As there was such clarity among many of the parties in the House about the fact that the House had a role to play, we petitioned, we signed early-day motions and we wrote letters—we did everything humanly possible. In the end, because of that failed, we decided collectively to set up our own alternative Parliament. I hired Church House so that Back-Bench Members of Parliament could speak on the matter. I met the former Speaker, “Jack” Bernard Weatherill, who kindly agreed, putting his own reputation on the line, to be the Speaker of that Parliament. One of the things we agreed was that people would not be left out, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) and I had been previously. Jack Weatherill said that he would call every single person who wanted to speak, for 10 minutes at least, even if it meant that his House—we were based at Church House, over the road, because we were not permitted to use our own Chamber—sat until 3 am.

Having got a critical mass of willing Back Benchers, I asked the BBC whether it would cover the debate. The BBC ummed and ahed, and it finally said that, since the actual Parliament would not be allowed to meet, it would cover the alternative Parliament from the opening to the end of its proceedings. Amazingly, within a day, I received a phone call from Robin Cook, saying, “You lot have won; we are going to recall the proper Parliament.” As he recalls in his diary, my reply was, “My God, that leaves me with a thousand vol-au-vents and 200 bottles of wine on my slate.” I had ordered them to refresh the members of the alternative Parliament, and I am still working my way through the vol-au-vents from my deep freeze.

This was the House at its best, in the sense that Back Benchers came together. Some are still here today, and some are not. They included Charles Kennedy, Chris Smith, Douglas Hogg, Peter Kilfoyle, Tony Lloyd, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the right hon. Members for Gordon (Alex Salmond), for Moray (Angus Robertson) and for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), and the hon. Members for Arfon (Hywel Williams), for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and for Angus (Mike Weir). I think about a quarter remain. We decided collectively how the resolutions, the amendments and our external relations should be framed. That was an example of Members of Parliament working together in an excellent way. On 24 September, Parliament was recalled and the debate was held. It was on a motion for the Adjournment, so not many people voted at that point.

We raised collectively a series of issues about how the House works, one of which was the question of legal advice to Members of Parliament. We were in a position where some of us could have been arraigned before the International Court of Justice, so we needed to know what the truth was. The then Clerk of the House said, “Yes, Mr Allen, I will get you some legal advice.” I thought, “Wonderful,” and I was sent off to the lawyer that the House employs to deal with health and safety matters, who assumed that some sort of accident had happened in the office and I was being taken to court. That was not of great help, although that was not the lawyer’s fault. The House and Members should have had legal advice, just as the Government had legal advice, which would, in itself, prove to be relatively controversial.

Another issue that arose was the question of war-making powers. We in this House should define how we are involved. The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee worked hard to come up with a sensible set of words that would allow a response in the event of immediate threat of attack, but with the House being consulted where appropriate. In a proper democracy, the Executive and the legislature work together.
Another issue is the recall of the House. Instead of having a farcical arrangement, we should allow the Speaker to say, “On the balance of what I have heard from people on this issue, there is a very strong feeling that the House should be recalled.” That would be better than a dozen people doing it, or 550 people not being allowed to do it. The Speaker should be given that power to recall, rather than the Government having the power to ask the Speaker to do that.

A further issue—this could not be dealt with in the Standing Orders—is a free vote on war. In the first vote on Wednesday 26 February, 122 Labour Back Benchers voted against the proposal, while 119 Labour Back Benchers voted with the Government. I am absolutely confident that if those Back Benchers had been allowed to make their own decision rather than being pressured by Whips, being asked to see the Prime Minister—even being asked to see the Prime Minister’s wife, on certain occasions—and being got at relentlessly, the number of Labour Members would have been much more than 122.

I would guess that a rump of about 20 or 30 Members would have voted with the Government, and that would have put them in a very difficult position.

Some of the Conservative Members who stood with us on that day deserve a mention at this point, after Chilcot. I have not spoken about this issue at any length since the decision for war because I thought my job was to support the young men and women of my constituency who went to war. I put it on record that the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) gave up a potential ministerial career. The hon. Members for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon), for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) and for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner), who are all still with us, also did so, as did good colleagues such as Peter Ainsworth, John Gummer and others who are no longer with us in this House. They all put their necks out very extensively.

Finally, on 18 March, we came to the vote on the amendment stating that the case for war was not established. Some 139 Labour colleagues supported that out of the total number of 217 MPs in favour. The number therefore went up, despite the immense pressure that was being put on people.

We went to war; we won the war. We lost the peace and we are now reaping the whirlwind. Let Parliament be strong “whatever”.

2 pm

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) and hear the historical background from his perspective.

Two weeks ago, many of us spoke in a moving debate on the centenary of the battle of the Somme. Throughout these islands and beyond, the events of 100 years ago were commemorated, and one recurring theme in this House and elsewhere was the importance of treasuring the young lives of our soldiers. When we read about the senseless slaughter of the Somme, we like to think that we are more sophisticated and less gullible than previous generations—that we are more concerned with the lives of others, whether our own soldiers or civilians abroad. Yet in this House, in very recent history, we voted for a war that was an unpardonable folly.

On 18 March 2003, 411 MPs followed Tony Blair into the Aye Lobby, unleashing the forces of hell in Iraq: 139 of those MPs still serve in Parliament today. It must be difficult to live with that vote. But rather than accept personal responsibility, too many say, “If I had known then what I know now, I would never have voted for the war.” That is what I want to focus on, because I do not buy it. It is too easy a cop-out. Tony Blair has become so discredited that he is a convenient depository for shared guilt. “It was his golden oratory that bamboozled me,” say some MPs. They talk of seductive mendacity, or ask who could have questioned our security services in all their wisdom. They say that they believed Colin Powell and his illustrated talk at the UN with its cartoon mock-up of mobile laboratories on trucks and that they fell for his dire warnings that the secular Saddam Hussein was in cahoots with the fundamentalist Osama bin Laden, however culturally illiterate that claim was. It was just all so convincing, they say—if they had only known then what they know now. It is all nonsense.

We did know then much of what we know now, and if we did not, it was because we chose not to absorb the expert opinion available at the time. We knew then that Saddam Hussein had once possessed chemical weapons. He had used them in the 1980s against the Kurds, the Iranians and the Shi’a. However, we also knew that the implementation from 1991 until the war in 2003 of two no-fly zones, one in the north of Iraq and one in the south, prevented any further chemical attacks, as those chemical weapons could no longer be dropped. Even at their height, Saddam Hussein’s powers had limits. In 1991, 39 scud missiles were fired at Israel—I was there at the time, as a journalist. They were cruelly targeted at Tel Aviv, and killed no one.

Even if Saddam Hussein could not fire his chemical weapons, might they somehow have become a threat on the battlefield? In the aftermath of the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the Gulf war, the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq was set up to inspect Iraqi weapons facilities. It maintained a presence in the country for several years. There was broad agreement among experts that Iraq was not an imminent threat. Those weapons that had been used against Iranian and Kurdish opponents had been destroyed or were degraded beyond use.

Let us remind ourselves of what the experts said at the time. Scott Ritter, a United Nations weapons inspector in Iraq from 1991 to 1998, stated in 2002 that “since 1998 Iraq has been fundamentally disarmed: 90-95% of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction capability has been verifiably eliminated... If Iraq was producing weapons...we would have...proof, plain and simple.”

Experts told us repeatedly that chemical weapons do not have a long shelf life. Ritter stated that Iraqi sarin and tabun had a shelf life of approximately five years. Botulinum toxin and liquid anthrax last about three years. As Members debated the war in this House, they knew that at the height of his powers Saddam had never had the capacity to fire chemical weapons long range and that, even if he had had that power, after years of no-fly zone restrictions and the passage of time, his weapons were degraded and beyond use.

Bob Stewart: I seem to recall that the hon. Gentleman and I were together in the television studios at the time and that we laughed at the mock-ups of the vehicles

[Mr Graham Allen]
that he mentioned. We agreed that if those vehicles existed, they could easily be photographed from the skies. We therefore thought that they could not exist: why would they need to make drawings of them when they would be able to get photographs of any actual vehicles?

John Nicolson: The hon. Gentleman remembers well. We did indeed sit together in television studios, because we journalists called in experts to ask them for their evidence. It was relatively easy, even as a journalist, to pick apart many of the absurd claims.

Of course, some journalists were screaming for war. The Sun ran the absurd headline “Brits 45mins from doom” about a supposed threat to troops in Cyprus. The Star wrote “Mad Saddam ready to attack: 45 minutes from a chemical war”. It was all nonsense. The journalists who wrote it knew that, but it was terrifying for some Members.

In January 2003, United Nations weapons inspectors reported that they had found no indication whatever that Iraq possessed nuclear weapons or an active programme of chemical weapons. The International Atomic Energy Agency at the time found “no evidence or plausible indication of the revival of a nuclear weapons programme in Iraq.”

The United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission said at the time that it “did not find evidence of the continuation or resumption of programmes of weapons of mass destruction.”

However, US Vice-President Dick Cheney retorted that he believed that Saddam Hussein “has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons. I think Mr. ElBaradei”—the director general of the IAEA at the time—“frankly is wrong.”

Who were parliamentarians to believe—the chemical weapons experts, the missiles experts, the IAEA, or Dick Cheney, George Bush, Donald Rumsfeld and the neo-cons? The House had to make up its mind.

In the run up to the Iraq war, I was working as a journalist, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out. Among other things, I was presenting a three-hour daily radio news programme. We had access to experts, as any news journalists do. We called them in and asked them to outline their evidence. Now, I am not a pacifist. I supported NATO action in Bosnia and Kosovo due to the imminent threat to life and the need to save civilians; in fact, I was on the flight back from Iraq—mentioned earlier—with the returning hostages who had fled from Saddam Hussein. However, during interviews with experts and academics in the run-up to the House’s vote, I saw clearly that the case for war was built on exaggeration and deceit. It was blindingly obvious.

Tony Blair frequently told this House and the British people that he was working towards disarming Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction. He repeatedly told the House that his aim was not regime change. The House could have been under no illusion about what it was being asked to vote on. Mr Blair said that Saddam was a “very brutal and repressive” leader but that the aim was “disarmament of weapons of mass destruction, it is not regime change.”

Regime change was not the basis for war. The challenge for the House on the day of the debate was clear. Mr Blair was asking Members to vote on one basis and one basis alone: the imminent danger posed by Saddam’s weaponry.

What if all the experts talking in public were wrong? Was there an elevated group of experts—an inner core with extraordinary knowledge that was unavailable to the ordinary expert? As Members will recall, Tony Blair often said, “If only you could see what crosses my desk, you’d never doubt the danger that we are in and the pressing case for immediate action.”

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my concerns about recent mission creep and the use of intelligence-led drone strikes that are notified to the House only after the event? What does that mean for lessons learned and transparency?

John Nicolson: Many Members keep saying that we have learned the lessons of war, but I am not convinced, and neither was I when we had the debate on Syria. Tony Blair made a direct appeal that he had seen privileged information that no one else had seen, and he asked the House to trust him. Many Members have said that that appeal for trust was what swayed them.

There was a direct appeal for Members to ignore the available scientific evidence, but there was one embarrassing hurdle in the way: Robin Cook. I had an extensive interview with Robin Cook after his resignation from the Labour Front Bench on 17 March 2003, and I asked him whether he saw the same briefings as the Prime Minister on Iraq. He said, “Yes, I do.” I asked him what it was that had crossed Mr Blair’s desk that he could not tell us about but that contradicted all the expert evidence. Robin Cook told me that there was nothing—nothing had crossed the Prime Minister’s desk that had not crossed his as Foreign Secretary and nothing had crossed his desk or that of the Prime Minister to suggest an imminent threat from chemical weapons. Robin Cook told me that, on that basis, the war could therefore not be justified. Every MP who listened to that interview, who met Robin Cook in the House or who took on board the opinion of experts at the time would have known that the case presented to this House was flimsy to the point of absurdity.

I am, of course, aware of the pressure that MPs were under. Setting aside their promotion prospects in the Government, tabloid newspapers had launched a vicious campaign against opponents of the war. The Sun published a traitors dartboard—I note that it has since deleted that from its website in the aftermath of the Chilcot report. It ran a front-page showing a picture of a snake and Charles Kennedy with the headline, “Spot the creep and the use of intelligence-led drone strikes that are notified to the House only after the event? What does that mean for lessons learned and transparency?”

As we survey the carnage of Iraq, with countless civilian lives lost, soldiers’ lives lost and family lives destroyed, it is easy to look for a single scapegoat. Although I share the disdain widely felt for Tony Blair, there is something gutless about attributing all blame to the wrong person. The truth is that expert information was freely available to any Member who chose to take it.
2.13 pm

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I welcome the fact that the Government have allocated two days for this debate. This is an opportunity to remind the House that although all Members considered the same evidence, presented to the House by Mr Blair, some—from all parties—came to a different conclusion from others about whether military action was timely or legal.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) is no longer in his place, but I thank him for the service that he has given this country, as have other Members. I reassure him that although I, along with many other Members, marched against the Iraq war. I have always been fully supportive of our troops who were dispatched by our Government to fight that war, or indeed any other war. I have no criticism of them; I might have some for their senior officers, but that is a different matter.

Since the publication of the Chilcot report, Lord Campbell of Pittenweem has provided a helpful summary of events in a speech in the House of Lords:

“We know that the Cabinet was not provided with the full, detailed opinions of the Attorney-General. Sir John Chilcot forcefully finds that that was not proper and should not happen again... He found that military action was not yet the last resort, that diplomatic options were still available, that there was no planning to speak of at all for the post-conflict period.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 12 July 2016; Vol. 774, c. 135.]

We also heard from Lord Tyler, who said that Chilcot was explicit that “going to war without a majority in the United Nations Security Council ‘undermined the authority of the UN’.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 12 July 2016; Vol. 774, c. 144.]

The Liberal Democrats have always put great stock in the importance of supporting the United Nations.

In the same debate, Lord Beith focused on some of the inadequacies in preparation, from a military perspective, by the Ministry of Defence, and asked why there was inadequate preparation for the known dangers of improvised explosive devices, and a failure to provide adequately armoured vehicles. I would therefore like to speak for a few minutes about the focus on post-conflict reconstruction—an area that has not had much of an outing today. Better planning and preparation for a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq might not necessarily have prevented the events that have unfolded in Iraq since 2003, but Chilcot identified the major issue that there was no planning to speak of at all for the post-conflict stage.

Before I was elected, I worked in project management, and a cursory examination of paragraph 590—on page 78—onwards of the report’s executive summary highlights that, if we consider the work done in Iraq as a project, it failed the most basic tests of initiation and execution for even the smallest project. For instance, is it clear who was responsible for which tasks? Paragraph 593 says no, and that “the UK assumed that the US would be responsible for preparing the post-conflict plan”.

Were there any contingency plans? Paragraph 601 says that none were made for the possibility of the UK being drawn into a huge commitment of UK resources.

Is there clarity about who had the power to take decisions? Paragraph 603 stated that no one had sufficient authority “to establish a unified planning process across... the FCO, the MOD, DFID and the Treasury.”

Was it clear who was in overall control? Paragraph 609 states that no single person was in charge of “overseeing all aspects of planning and preparation”.

Were sufficiently trained and experienced people available? Paragraph 610 states:

“The FCO... was not equipped by past experience... to prepare for nation-building of the scale required in Iraq...”

Were the assumptions challenged? Paragraph 618 states that assumptions were not systematically challenged, and that in fact, they were very seldom challenged. Any project manager—even the most junior one—in IT, construction, or any other field, who designed a project that was as poorly planned, initiated, resourced and executed as this one, would have been sacked. Yet in 2002-03, our Government planned to invade a country, support regime change, introduce democracy, and rebuild the Iraqi infrastructure without so much as a plan written on the back of a fag packet. This lack of planning for the post-conflict period was one of the most shocking aspects of the Iraq war.

In conclusion, the Iraq war and its legacy—interminable religious war, some 180 UK troops killed, many casualties, car bombs, suicide bombers, hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqi citizens, millions displaced and instability—reverberates around the region to this day. We can argue about whether this was all linked directly to our intervention in 2003, but I do not think anyone could claim that our intervention in 2003 helped to stabilise Iraq—on the contrary. What we need from the Minister today is reassurances that the UK Government will never, ever again launch into such a reckless adventure on such a flimsy premise, with so little preparation. I wonder whether the Minister will be able to give us that guarantee.

2.20 pm

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): I was a Member of this House when the decision to invade Iraq was taken. Plaid Cymru was against the war from the start, along with our friends in the Scottish National party and other parties; I acknowledge their part. Elfyn Llwyd, Adam Price, Simon Thomas and I were unanimous in our opposition to the war. As with others, we were subject to vilification way beyond that expected in the usual argy-bargy between politicians with opposing views, or even from a critical press. I made no complaints then and I make no complaints now, for we did not really pay an onerous price. That was paid by those who lost their life, by those who were injured physically and psychologically, by the women and children who were killed “collaterally”, by those who still grieve, and by those whose lives have been blighted forever. It is right to say that now, when opposition to the war is a common-sense accepted view. It was not the case then.

Plaid Cymru is instinctively for peace, but we are not a pacifist party. We are prepared to support military action as a last resort, in extreme circumstances and with international agreement. That is why we supported emergency military action in Libya, with the required support of the United Nations. In retrospect, I regret that we did not then press the case for reconstruction harder. We have seen the effect of intervention in Libya without reconstruction, as we have seen it in Iraq.
Immediately in the report we find two of the reasons why we opposed the invasion of Iraq. The required second UN resolution had not been passed; and, as Chilcot states clearly in point 20 of the executive summary, “the diplomatic options had not at that stage been exhausted. Military action was therefore not a last resort.”

Mr Blair presented Iraq as a real and present danger with a certainty that was not justified. Yesterday, the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) made a very telling point. His colleague, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), persuaded him the night before to vote for the war, having, in turn, been misled by Mr Blair, and that on Privy Council terms. We contend that Mr Blair misled the House. For that, he must be held to account. It is clear from Chilcot, not least from Mr Blair’s memo to President Bush, that he had already agreed to go to war, while giving the House the impression that it had a part in the matter. That is the only reasonable interpretation of the infamous statement on page 72 of volume 2:

“I will be with you, whatever.”

That was Mr Blair’s choice all along. As point 364 in the summary states, the UK Government held “that it was right or necessary to defer to its close ally and senior partner, the US.”

It was clear that President Bush had already, long before, decided to go to war. My personal experience confirms this. I was with Adam Price, then the MP for Carmarthen East, at the State Department in Washington in mid-September 2002—I think it was 10 September—on a visit with other new MPs arranged by the British-American Parliamentary Group. It was a very useful and instructive visit. It was the first anniversary of 9/11, and feelings were running very high, with myriad official ceremonies to commemorate the dead and support the forces of justice—and with the implied and explicit intention of making someone pay. One felt that it was about not just making someone pay, but making anyone pay for what had happened. That was the atmosphere then, and it is important to remember that.

In Washington, we discussed Iraq with a State Department official. He was not a high official; rather, he was one tasked with briefing rookie MPs from across the pond. It was Adam Price who put the blunt question, “Do you intend to invade Iraq?” The answer was equally forthright: “Yes,” he said, “With our friends if we can, and without them if we must.” This was the commonplace view among officials at that time, one that they could share with insignificant visitors like ourselves. It is our very insignificance that is the significant point. If we, as insignificant visitors, knew what they intended to do, then so did Mr Blair and his associates.

Mr Graham Allen: I compliment the hon. Gentleman on his part in the Iraq rebellions. If I may put the record straight, the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) also played a significant part on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. What the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) says about America going ahead regardless of the UK is absolutely right. One week before the final vote on whether to go to Iraq, Donald Rumsfeld said in a press conference that it was not necessary for the UK to join America: there would be workarounds if the UK decided not to go ahead.

Hywel Williams: The hon. Gentleman makes a very telling point. It was a conscious choice to join our senior ally and defer to their view of the world. The very significant point is that a political choice was made by Mr Blair and his associates. He knew what America intended. We know about the evidence from the meetings at Crawford, so I do not need to go over that, but of course he knew, and his response was:

“I will be with you, whatever.”

In the conversation I referred to a moment ago, American preparedness was confirmed quite casually when I asked what the war aims were. I have a long-standing interest in the Kurdish people, although I concede it is the Kurdish people in eastern Anatolia, or the northern Kurds, rather than the southern Kurds, with whom the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) has been involved for so many years. I asked what the war aims were, and the answer was very clear. The official said, “We are looking for a democratic Iraq within its current borders.” I remember the words quite clearly, because the Kurds in the north were thinking, as they are today, of being at least a semi-independent entity, if not a southern part of a greater Kurdistan. We know the subsequent outcome all too well. The northern Iraqi southern Kurds, of course, have a degree of self-government. A democratic Iraq within its current borders has clearly not been achieved. My point is that there was no secrecy about this; there was no deficiency of vision and idealism, just an enormous deficiency of realism and good sense.

I will finish on this point, as time is short and many colleagues wish to speak. I ask the Minister for action. Yesterday, the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) expressed his doubts and concerns about a process of sanction that could be employed by this House in respect of Mr Blair. He made a very cogent argument and I found it very interesting. I do not know if it was entirely persuasive, but he clearly made his argument very well indeed.

We in Plaid Cymru have called consistently for those responsible for taking the UK to war in Iraq to appear before the International Criminal Court. The crime of aggression is listed in the statutes establishing the ICC, but it is not currently prosecutable by that Court. Some 30 countries have agreed to rectify this, following a convention in 2010. The UK has also said, informally, that it would support such a change, but it has not yet formally ratified that position. Under ICC rules, two thirds of signatories have to agree, which would require 82 countries to sign up, so I call on the UK Government formally to agree to the necessary change, in order to pave the way for prosecuting those responsible for taking the UK into an illegal war in Iraq, I look to the Minister for that assurance today.

2.30 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I begin with a declaration of interest: my brother served on the frontline in the Iraq war, so the decision taken on the Floor of the House that night had a direct impact on both my family and his wife and two children.

I get concerned when we discuss Islam in this House and equate it with fanaticism and fundamentalism. Many belief systems are prone to fanaticism, and I am mindful that, before 9/11, the greatest terrorist act that the US had ever suffered took place in 2005, when a
Christian fanatic killed 168 people and injured nearly 1,000 over a 16-block radius in Oklahoma. If Members wish to debate fanaticism, I wish that they would bring it to the Floor of the House and debate it in detail.

Just under three months ago, I and many other colleagues participated in a debate—I was grateful to be able to sum up for my party—that called for publication of the Chilcot report. I am glad, therefore, that we are now debating its publication. Like others, I am grateful to Sir John and all those who participated in its construction for their diligent work and the manner in which they carried out their examinations. I believe that the report will go down as one of the most important documents debated on the Floor of the House and will have far-reaching consequences. I agree with the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), however, that it has sadly been overshadowed by the political events of the last couple of weeks.

The publication and conclusion of the report will come as some comfort to the families of Army personnel such as my own and to casualties in the conflict who have been waiting for answers for far too long about why we were taken to war. I praise those families who, like their loved ones, fought the good fight and never allowed this issue to be forgotten in their quest for justice and truth. The House must note their courage in seeking answers to the conflict. The report should and must send reverberations through the whole British establishment, which has been undermined by the decision to go to war. It must, if anything, enhance the debate about the nature of our constitutional democracy and the duties of Government in their attitude to war and peace.

The words “I will be with you, whatever” will be forever associated with the former Member for Sedgefield and will be his political epitaph, yet the phrase is much more than that. It will forever live in and scar the hearts of those families whose relations were casualties of the war, whether as members of our armed services or Iraqi civilians. That is the true legacy of “I will be with you, whatever.” That must never be allowed to be forgotten. It is a reminder to all representatives that our actions have wide-ranging consequences beyond this place and our own lives.

Bob Stewart: For me, that phrase really blows apart my belief that Prime Ministers, regardless of political persuasion, always act in the best interests of our country. It is deeply upsetting to think that that phrase was used in a memo to the US President.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am grateful for the intervention from the hon. and gallant Member, whose opinion I often taken on board. I will come to his point further in my speech.

The actions in the lead-up to the invasion had a detrimental and fundamental impact on confidence in our democracy and parliamentary system. We must use the report to rebuild that confidence and trust, as we risk so much if we do not. That is particularly critical as parliamentary democracy is being attacked across the world as we speak. The report raises damning and fundamental issues about the role of the Government in the run-up to the invasion. The duty of the Government is to carry out their responsibilities in a responsible and transparent manner. In matters of war and peace, that is particularly vital, but it is now clear that, in 2003, the actions of the former Member for Sedgefield flew in the face of that.

We are told that collective responsibility has underpinned our democracy for centuries, but, as the report outlines, that system was abused and ignored by the former Member for Sedgefield. His actions are a warning to the current and future Governments that the mechanism of government itself must not be twisted and subverted by an individual to meet their own delusional, self-appointed, God-like views and that full transparency and accountability must be always ensured. To ensure accountability and transparency, and for justice to be done, those who made the decision to go to war must be brought to order.

That is why, like many other Members, I will be fully supporting the contempt motion against the former Member for Sedgefield that the general public expect and which the House needs to demand. The international community must see justice done. There will be those who question the motion, given the former premier’s public apology, but I draw this conclusion from that apology: an act of contrition requires a heartfelt, sincere and full intention not to recommit that sin. In the light of the apology given by the former Member for Sedgefield, I would advise him to seek a longer counsel with his confessor in order that he might understand the full concept of an act of contrition.

In conclusion, I wish to consider the words of the former Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament, George Reid, when a motion was placed before that place on this very matter: “Above the doors of the Red Cross in Geneva, there is a phrase from Dostoevsky, which we should remember in time of war. It states that, in war, ‘Everyone is responsible to everyone for everything.’”

It reminds me of the journalist Michael Ware and his account of his time reporting the conflict: while we might wish to see peace and an end to war, only the dead see the end of war.

2.38 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): A number of people have said today that the 2003 decision casts a long shadow, and indeed it does. There has been much talk about lessons learned and lessons needing to be learned, but I fear that this is largely about: “I was right and others were wrong”. There is a slightly self-righteous tone when people talk about where they stood on the vote in 2003 that I feel will not help us to make the decisions facing us, which are as serious, dangerous and consequential as any.

I was not in the House in 2003; I did not come in until 2005. At the time, I was one of those marching up and down and saying no to war. When I came in, I never in my wildest dreams thought that I would spend most of my time on defence matters, but I came into the Chamber one day and noticed a group of middle-aged men talking to another group of middle-aged men across the Chamber on perhaps one of the most important subjects facing the country. I thought, “I’m not having this”, and I went out of my way to teach myself defence. I
have to say that that is necessary—unless someone has been in the armed forces, they have to go out and learn, find out how decisions are made, what equipment to use, how on earth a decision to go to war is implemented and how it is carried through. It is not enough to be a Member of Parliament and think that defence is something that can be dipped into. Sadly, too many right hon. and hon. Members think it is.

I do not feel that people have the right to criticise unless they have looked and questioned: what equipment are our people going to war with; how many of them are there; what is going to happen when the number of personnel we want to send is balanced against the number of personnel that can be met? We made a disastrous decision when we sent our people to Helmand, but nobody questioned it. We are not having a big two-day debate about that disaster. How many hon. Members have bothered to read any of the Defence Committee reports on anything? Quite honestly, I wonder how many Members have read the strategic defence and security review. How many Members have been worried and concerned at the paring back over and again of our armed forces? How many have been concerned about the cuts to the platforms that our armed forces will be able to utilise?

It is all very well to go back to 2003 and beat our breasts. It is all very well to spend seven years. Since I have been a Member, I have taken three decisions on going to war—and I spent a lot of time on all three of them. Libya was as great a disaster as Iraq. I spent a lot of time asking whether it was about regime change, and I was told, “No, it is not about regime change.” I do not believe that to be true—I think it was always about regime change. I asked what we were going to do about post-conflict reconstruction, because it was the big lesson from Iraq, and I was told, “We are not putting boots on the ground, so it isn’t an issue for us.”

Bob Stewart: The hon. Lady knows that I have deep respect for her, which will continue. I seem to recall, however, that we had little choice but to intervene in Libya, and I voted for it because I was terrified that people would be killed.

Mrs Moon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that most helpful intervention, because it takes us back to the exact same issue that people faced when dealing with Saddam Hussein. He led people down a track that really made intervention almost inevitable. He ignored the cuts to the platforms that our armed forces will be able to utilise.

I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman was with us on the visit, but when we met a group of tribal elders in a room in Iraq, they told us that the last time they had been in it, they had been called there by Saddam to hear a report about the changes he was introducing to the health service in Iraq. Someone had stood up at that meeting and said not that he disagreed with it, not that he thought Saddam was wrong, but that a small change might make it slightly better. The man was marched out of the room and shot at the front door of the building. That is the world that we were trying to understand.

On that occasion, too, I asked why on earth Saddam did not simply say, “I have given up the weapons of mass destruction; I do not have any.” I got rid of the chemical weapons; I do not have any.” I asked why he did not just step forward and say that. I was told, “Because he was more afraid of his own people than he was of you, so he had to convince not you but his own people that he had those weapons.” That, I was told, was why he kept that myth going—not for us, not because he was afraid of our invasion, but because he was afraid of his own people if they thought he showed any weakness.

The situation was exactly the same in Libya. Gaddafi made it impossible for hon. Members to feel that we could sit back and let him say, “I am going to slaughter those people in Benghazi,” which is what he said he was going to do. We acted, but look at the consequences. In seven years’ time, are people going to stand up and criticise us for that vote? Are they going to say self-righteously, “How dare you? You did not do enough on post-conflict reconstruction.” No, we did not; and, yes, it is a mess. There are so many lessons that we have to learn.

I have been to Iraq and to Afghanistan. As a member of the Defence Committee, I believe that if we send our personnel there, we have a responsibility to go ourselves, to see for ourselves and to talk to people on the frontline and ask them, “Have you got the right kit? Have you got the right equipment? Are you being looked after all right? What do we in Parliament need to change? Tell us and we will be your voice.” Those are the lessons we have to learn.

We need to be more robust in our understanding of defence. We have to be more responsible in understanding the tasks and the responsibilities we place in front of our armed forces. We do not want to be sitting here pontificating about whether Tony Blair was a liar, or whether a jolly big “but” continued underneath the sentence when he said:

“I will be with you, whatever.”

I want us to look much more at what we have learned and what we are going to do in the future. I doubt whether many Members have read it, but the Defence Committee recently put out a report about Russia—be afraid, be very afraid, because that is coming down the track.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I may disagree with certain elements of the hon. Lady’s speech, but does she agree that one of the problems during the period was that many of the major partners of the United Nations, including the Russian Federation, did not want to play their part?

Mrs Moon: I look at the Russians in Syria. I look at what the Russians did in Afghanistan. Do I want to stand alongside them? I have my standards. The hon. Gentleman may have different standards, but I am not for the barrel bombing of civilians, which the Russians think perfectly acceptable.

I am not someone who will be happy about coming to the House and just saying, “We made mistakes in Iraq.” We made mistakes in Libya. In fact, we have made mistakes in every war in which this country has been involved. What I would like to know—I am glad that the Secretary of State is present—is whether the historical analysis team that used to be in the Ministry of Defence and that analysed and taught the lessons learnt to military personnel will be reinstated, because that would have more impact than anything else that we are discussing here. That is what we need: we need our personnel to know the lessons that will be learned.
What about the South China sea? We have 19 ships. Those who are worried about Iraq should worry about the South China sea. Please let us be realistic, because the world is looking and laughing at our tearing ourselves apart. I want a confident Britain. I want a secure Britain. I want a Britain that is not afraid of making difficult decisions, a Britain that is not afraid of sticking its hand into a wasps’ nest and a Britain that is well equipped and well trained but will take on its responsibilities in the world. We will look at our mistakes and we will learn, but we will not waste our time casting rude and offensive remarks at people who lead us.

2.51 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). I commend her for her thoughtful and well-informed contribution to the debate. I did not agree with every point that she made—no one would expect me to—but I did agree with her about the tone that we should adopt in our approach to this debate: it right for us to approach it with a degree of humility and to be careful not to reinvent history.

I was here in 2003, and I remember those debates. As I listened to the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), I could hear her speaking from the Opposition Benches, but I kept looking over to the Government Benches, because that is where I remember her sitting when she made her speeches in the 2003 debates, and they were very powerful speeches.

I well remember the atmosphere described by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who recalled the way in which the votes were whipped and the way in which the Government really did make every effort to steamroller the motions through the House. He said that he felt vindicated. I know what he meant by that, but I do not sense anything quite as positive as vindication in this. If anything, I feel slightly depressed, because I think that there was an inevitability that was not addressed by the House at the time, and I fear that we would still not address it if we were placed in the same position today.

I will say a bit more about that later and about how I think the House should deal with it in the future, but I should first place on record our gratitude to Sir John Chilcot and his team for doing a thorough piece of work. Like others, I have been critical of the length of time that it has taken, but there is no denying the thoroughness of the work that has been done. What we see before us on the Table certainly clarifies one thing in my mind: we were absolutely right to set up an independent inquiry. We have been chivvying that man and his team for years, and now we see why it has taken him as long as it has.

The report fills in a lot of the background detail. It does not tell us anything that we did not already know or have cause to believe, in the broadest terms. However, Sir John has placed a number of dots on the page, and it is now for Parliament to join them up to produce a discernible picture. In particular, he says, quite clearly and quite fairly, that he will not express a view on the legality of the war, but he offers us evidence from which we can draw our own conclusions.

We are shown the already infamous memo from Tony Blair to George Bush in which he said: “I will be with you, whatever.” I think it important for the House to put that in the context of the time. As others have pointed out, Tony Blair was always meticulous in the House in making a case that was based on weapons of mass destruction. That was not true of George Bush. George Bush never pretended this was anything other than an exercise in regime change, so when Tony Blair wrote that memo to George Bush, he was saying, “I will support you even though I know what you are doing is something which is done on a quite different basis than that for which I am seeking authority from the House of Commons.” That is significant because, of course, a war entered into for the sole purpose of regime change would be an illegal war, whereas one for which the purpose was the removal of weapons of mass destruction was one for which there could have been a legal basis.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) posed a pertinent question. He asked, “How would the House have reacted if Tony Blair had been more balanced and even-handed in the presentation of the evidence?” That is where the detail of what Chilcot tells us is important, because in fact we see from that memo why Tony Blair was not more even-handed and balanced in the presentation of the evidence: he was working to an objective; he was working to an aim; he was supporting a commitment he had already made.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the Syria vote in 2013. I gently suggest that he might want to refresh his memory of the terms of the motion against which he and others voted, quite legitimately. I do not challenge his right or his reasons for doing so, but it was not a vote to remove Assad; it was a motion instructing the Government to obtain authority from the United Nations and then to come back to this House before any further military action was to be sanctioned. That was why I was prepared to support it.

Dr Julian Lewis: I was not planning to intervene as I have made my speech, but—this is one of the knock-on effects of the matter we are discussing today—by the time we got to that vote we knew perfectly well that if we had passed that motion, the bombing would have started that weekend. All the planes were ready to go, and I am surprised that the right hon. Gentleman is, if I may gently say so, naive enough to believe anything else.

Mr Carmichael: With respect, I do not want to get taken down a side alley and into the question of Syria, compelling though that is, but the bombing could not have started on the authorisation of this House on the basis of the motion put to the House and against which the right hon. Gentleman voted. It is interesting to speculate, although not necessarily wholly germane to this debate, what would have happened had the House gone down the route urged on it in 2013—what might then have been the reaction of President Obama, how things might then have moved on, whether we would have been in the position we were in relation to the vote we took last year on Syria. What I think is undeniable is that all these decisions and others—Libya is a good example—were taken under a cloud, which still hangs over our foreign policy and our role in the world, as a result of the experience of the debate on Iraq.
As my right hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) pointed out, it is remarkable that if regime change was the agenda that sat behind the Americans’ intervention in Iraq, they did so little to prepare for its aftermath. The removal of the Ba’ath party from government must stand out as being one of the biggest strategic errors we have ever been party to. It completely failed to understand that many ordinary Iraqis who were engaged in Iraqi government and civic society did so as part of the Ba’ath party because it was the only party in town. To remove the infrastructure of government in the way that was done in 2003 has left a void in that infrastructure that remains a problem for Iraq to this day. The country has never recovered from that, and it provided fertile ground from which extremism flourished. That was all predicted by many of us who questioned the decision to go to war in 2003.

The House today is very different from the House that took that decision. Only 172 of the 659 Members who were here in 2003 remain Members today. I calculate that 141 of those 172 voted in favour of taking action, and 21 voted against it. I re-read the Hansard reports of the February and March debates before I came here today, and I was reminded that there was not a great atmosphere in the House at the time. On that, I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire. It was tense and brutal, and deliberately so. It was the creation of that atmosphere that forced many people to vote for the enterprise against their better judgment.

It is important that we approach this matter with some humility. The amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) garnered some support. It said that the case for war had not been proven, and that was certainly the view that I took. I was not going to vote for a motion that said we would never go to war in any circumstances, because, like other Members, I knew that Saddam was a brutal dictator. We also knew that he had had weapons of mass destruction in the past. In fact, we had been quite happy to turn a blind eye to that fact because he had been using them against Iran, whose regime we were also quite happy to see removed.

It was that sort of double standard in our foreign policy that I hoped we might see the end of after the enterprise in Iraq. Sadly, that does not seem to be the policy that I hoped we might see the end of after the creation of that infrastructure that continues to be an issue in Iraq.

There is a huge lesson to be learned from this, as I have heard from people who took part in the debates at the time on both sides of the House. Those debates took place before I was in Parliament. Those people now regret that they downloaded their sense and judgment from the Dispatch Box in the belief that no Prime Minister would tell them such things unless they were firm and true. They therefore believed that what they were being told must be right. Of course, those who demurred from that view were demonised in the House and outside it. If there is any lesson to learn from all this, it has to be that we should never again mistake certitude at the Dispatch Box for certainty about such grave matters.

We are told by some people that the report reveals no smoking gun in relation to the former Prime Minister. People have listed exaggerated versions of the charges against Tony Blair—that he lied, for example, and that he misled Parliament—and say that none of that is in the report. I have stated previously that I know Sir John Chilcot and have experience of working with him in Northern Ireland in various capacities. I also said that while he had many attributes and skills, I was unsure whether he would be found in the “Yellow Pages” under “I” for independent or “C” for challenging. I accept, however, that the report is compelling. It may be written with typical British understatement, but we should not neglect the key truths within and the lessons that need to be learned. Some will say, “There is no smoking gun about the dodgy dossier or anything else,” but I will give an example of Sir John Chilcot’s understatement. He says in paragraph 836 of the executive summary:

“The Inquiry shares the Butler Review’s conclusions that it was a mistake not to see the risk of combining in the September dossier the JIC’s assessment of intelligence and other evidence with the interpretation and presentation of the evidence in order to make the case for policy action.”

That is a telling criticism of what exactly was afoot with the September dossier.

The Prime Minister—well, last week’s Prime Minister—highlighted in his statement that Sir John had identified that an “infrained belief” was genuinely held by people in both the US and UK Governments about Saddam and his weapons. I know that to be true. In November 2002, Tony Blair addressed myself and other socialist leaders in Downing Street and not only told us what he believed was the case with Saddam and what he thought would be found, but shared the view that the US was going to go to war anyway and it was important that he maintained a restraining influence. He described himself as something of a bridge, trying to ensure that America would not go too far on Iraq. I remember saying to him that I did not buy the image that he was selling of himself as a mooring rope, attempting to hold America closer to where Europe was on such matters, and that I felt that America saw him as a tow rope who would pull Europe and possibly rupture it. I do not doubt, however, that he sincerely believed that he was somehow in a position to restrain and influence America by adopting the course that he was preparing to take.

Mr Alistair Carmichael: A very different approach was taken at the time by Canada. Jean Chrétien, the then Prime Minister, said that Canada would not stand with the United States. Now, 13 years down the line,
does the hon. Gentleman think that the relationship between Canada and the United States is any the worse for Chrétien’s decision?

Mark Durkan: No, absolutely not.

To say that I might accept that there was an ingrained belief, genuinely held, is not to endorse or accept that belief, or to say that it was a wise belief. It was a foolish and rash belief that was, in some ways, deluded.

Alongside that ingrained belief, the report also states that the UK Government, and Tony Blair in particular, had an ingrained intent that was not genuinely expressed either to this House or in public—those are not the report’s words, but mine. The ingrained intent was that he was going to war anyway, because he thought that that was where America was going. The report contains example after example of evidence being bent, melted and confected to justify that the preparation for any intervention would be undertaken on the basis of weapons of mass destruction, whereas it was clear that the then Prime Minister knew that the intervention in which he would be joining America really had an agenda of regime change. People in this House and elsewhere knew that that was illegal, so that view was withheld.

People might say, “Chilcot hasn’t said that Tony Blair lied to or misled this House”—it was not for Chilcot to make such a finding about a parliamentary matter—but nobody can say that there was no duplicity of presentation throughout.

The report’s other big indictment is about the paucity of preparation. I refer to the fact that there was a commitment to go to war without the proper equipment to protect and safeguard people who were being put in harm’s way, or to allow them to give care to people whom they would be meeting in distress. There was a paucity of preparation for the aftermath with regard to any sort of reconstruction. People had the assumption, “The Americans will somehow sort that out. We assume they have that done.” That is serious and must bear on all our minds.

When we have had votes such as those on Syria and on Libya during my time in this House, I and other hon. Members have had to consider what we were being told, and what assurances and assumptions the Government’s position was resting on. That is why I have not been convinced on any of those. I say that not from a point of view of self-righteousness, because I was in the small minority of those who voted against the action in Libya and hoped that I was going to be proved wrong. When it looked as though the early intervention had achieved the short-term goals that people had wanted it to achieve, I was more than happy to have been proved wrong.

There were times during the debates on Syria in this House when some of us who were asking about the Government’s proposals were advised that we should just listen to what the Prime Minister was saying. During the last such debate, there were people here who still had not learned the lessons from the Iraq war, because they were saying, “If our Prime Minister is telling us this, we should do it. We should proceed.” It is clear that in this House we need to do much more to learn the lessons from all this.

The motion is that “this House has considered” the Chilcot report. Obviously, I do not demur from that motion, but we should not pretend to ourselves that this two-day debate is anything like an adequate consideration of the report. I cannot pretend to have read all 2.6 million words, and other hon. Members have not pretended to have read them either. This debate has also taken place in the context of a swirl of other events, which is somewhat distracting. A strong undertone in this debate has been the question of the former Prime Minister, and the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) was right in pleading that we should not just personalise this around the former Prime Minister. The hon. Gentleman also made hugely important points on behalf of people who serve in these sorts of military ventures.

I ask hon. Members who tried to say that the report exonerates Tony Blair to stop making the mistake of polishing its non-findings and trying to rubbish some of its findings. Some people who are highlighting the non-findings are also questioning several of the findings about what the future course should be, and what future requirements should be with regard to upholding UN positions, and proper parliamentary oversight, information and awareness.

The final point I make, in agreeing with the hon. Member for Bridgend about her statement, “People don’t have the right to criticise unless they asked about the equipment,” is that people also do not have the right to justify the Iraq war and to pretend that the Chilcot report is not an indictment of the decision and how it was taken if they did not ask questions at the time. The report tells us that those questions should have been screaming out to us at the time, and if we look carefully at the report, we see that any reading of the intelligence available to MPs at the time would have told them that they were there.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): It is a privilege to take part in this debate on the Chilcot report and to have listened to colleagues who have much greater knowledge and more direct experience of these issues and events than I have. I do not intend to repeat many of the points that have been made. I was not an MP at the time, so my opposition to the Iraq war came from my limited knowledge from outside this House. I made my views known vigorously to my then MP.

In his report, Chilcot has been prepared to be very critical of processes and decisions, and the opportunity to be critical is vital to our democracy. What is important now is that we learn the lessons from the report. I wish to remind Members that it was the Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown who set up the Chilcot inquiry in June 2009. He also set out the inquiry’s remit: it would cover the period between 2001 and 2009, including the way in which decisions were made and actions were taken; and identify the lessons that could be learned. There had been calls for an inquiry before, while our troops were still in Iraq, and our response was rightly that we should wait until all our troops had withdrawn and then the Labour Prime Minister would instigate an inquiry.

We now need to learn the lessons, and we as parliamentarians should focus in particular on the decision-making process. The basis for the Attorney General’s advice on the legality of the war was:
“The Attorney General understands that it is unequivocally the Prime Minister’s view that Iraq has committed further material breaches as specified in [operative] paragraph 4 of resolution 1441, but . . . this is a judgment for the Prime Minister”.

The legal advice put the onus clearly on the Prime Minister, and the lesson that we should learn is that whether at the level of Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, Defence Secretary, or the wider Cabinet, or as MPs, we should scrutinise any such advice carefully before we commit to war.

In 2013, when MPs were considering the vote on military intervention in Syria, events in Iraq were very much in their minds. Put simply, when we see the terrible suffering in Syria, the dilemma is how to deal with it. Would our military intervention cause more suffering and make matters worse? What do we do about a leader such as Assad? Even if he were removed, who would fill the power gap?

As the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) said, we must fund the FCO properly and ensure that we have a thorough, detailed and up-to-date understanding of the complexities of what is happening in many foreign countries where there is the potential for conflict and we could be involved. The FCO is an easy option for cuts as it is out of sight and such cuts are not likely to cause public outcry, but if better understanding and diplomatic efforts mean that we can avoid the devastation and human cost of war, that represents money well spent. The same is true of the commitment to devote 0.7% of GDP to international development, because an important part of that work is conflict resolution. Such work helps to make the world a safer place and reduces the need for military intervention.

During the previous Parliament, it was worrying to note that Sir John Stanley, the Chair of the Committees on Arms Export Controls, reported that since 2010 there had been less stringency about which regimes we were exporting to. It is vital that we are wary of which weapons we sell to whom. The Committees should continue to be vigilant and the Government should be responsive to concerns.

We need to uphold our support for the UN and strengthen its work. On the Security Council, the UK is the informal lead on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. Therefore, as chair of the all-party group on weapons and protection of civilians, I am concerned that the UK—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There are still quite a few Members present. I will put that down to the fact that Members present. I am new to the Chamber. Given the gravity of the Chilcot report, I am surprised that there were not more Members present. I will put that down to the fact that much else is going on in the political firmament, and that there is so much to read. The onus is on those on the Government Benches to think about that, and to realise that this is not the end of the Chilcot investigation. A lot more discussion and thought has to go into that report. I appeal to the Government to take that away and think about how we can come back to, and look into, all the ramifications that the report has brought to this Chamber.

No one has quite given due recognition to the fact that it was the previous Labour Government, under Gordon Brown, who commissioned this report, and that should be recognised, because it was a brave thing to do. I would gently chide those on the Conservative Benches, because after the Suez crisis—the other post-war global diplomatic disaster that Britain blundered into—there were repeated attempts in the remaining eight years of Conservative Government after 1956 to get a public inquiry, but they were systematically rejected, and that was a dangerous precedent. Having got the Chilcot report, we have learned that, when we make mistakes, we have to own up to them and examine the details.

I have particularly—“enjoyed” is perhaps the wrong word—appreciated listening to those on both sides of the House who took part in the debate in 2003. However, I have been surprised by the attempts of some Members—particularly on the Labour side—to justify what was clearly the biggest diplomatic blunder of the last 30 years. I was particularly surprised by the right hon. Members for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), both of whom tried to draw some comfort from the fact that the Chilcot report has not found the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, guilty of misleading the House. I do not know whether that is what Chilcot set out to do, but it certainly comes down to what we mean by “mislead”. There is abundant evidence in the Chilcot findings—even from a cursory read of the report, and even in the summary report—that the facts were pummelled, twisted, jumped on and stretched to the point where no one knew what was going on. That was a deliberate move by the Executive to try to impose their view of the world on this Chamber.

That is abundantly clear, and we have to grasp the fact that, as well as the politics, the diplomacy and the military issues Chilcot deals with, there is a constitutional issue at the heart of the report, which this Chamber and you, Mr Speaker, have to take into account: the Executive, in the shape of Tony Blair and his immediate allies, got out of hand. This Chamber and the Cabinet lost control of the Executive in the run-up to the intervention in Iraq. That is the fundamental finding of the Chilcot report. The intervention, and all the disasters that came from it, are important, but if we abstract from that, we see that the Executive were not under control. It has been rare in the history of this
House, and particularly in latter decades, for the Executive to get completely out of control, and that can never happen again.

If we are to have a debate about bringing some of these individuals, including the former Prime Minister Tony Blair, to this House to answer for their actions, the issue should not be retribution, or holding them to account because they were wrong on Iraq and got us into a terrible disaster. That is an issue, but the fundamental issue for the House in deciding whether the former Prime Minister should be held to account in this Chamber is that the Executive got out of control. We have to learn the lessons of that, and we cannot let it happen again. If that is what happened—I believe that it was, and that is what the Chilcot report shows—we cannot let those who flouted this House and Cabinet Government get away with it. If we do that, it could happen again.

I was rather surprised by the vehemence with which the right hon. Member for Leeds Central and other Labour Members tried to argue that, whatever mistakes were made in the intervention in 2003, the ramifications—the breakdown of law and order and of society in Iraq, and the subsequent calamities that have beset the middle east—were the fault not of that intervention alone, but of the great fragmentation and deep divisions in the middle east, and that, as bad as and mistaken as the intervention was, it cannot be held to be fundamental to the divisions and other developments in the last 30 years. I am sorry, but Chilcot and history show otherwise. For example, Daesh is a horrible amalgam of the former military leadership of Saddam’s Ba’ath party and people who were radicalised inside American jails after the intervention in Iraq. There is abundant evidence, and it is a reasonable conclusion, that Daesh, as a movement, would not have existed had we not invaded Iraq and caused the meltdown of what there was of Iraqi society. We have been living with that consequence ever since.

Labour Members are rather misguided in not understanding the role of western intervention, and western support for Saddam in his war against Iran in the decade before America’s and Great Britain’s intervention in Iraq. The long and horrible war between Iraq and Iran was fundamentally supported by the west as a means of containing Iran after 1979. That war multiplied a millionfold the divisions between the Sunni and the Shi’ite populations of the middle east and north Africa. We are living with those consequences, too. The west cannot claim that it is not culpable for stoking up the divisions in the middle east prior to 2003.

We are not finished with Chilcot, and we are not finished with the ramifications of the failure of this House and of Cabinet government to control and hold to account the Executive. I ask you, Mr Speaker, to bear that in mind when any such issues are raised in this House in future.

3.27 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): During these two days of debate, we have heard from Members in all parts of the House who have contributed substantively and thoughtfully on this extremely sensitive and controversial subject. That has given us the chance to have a rigorous debate, and to give the subject dutiful consideration and sombre reflection. I thank all my colleagues.

First, I would like to add my own personal tribute to the 179 servicemen and women who gave their lives in the Iraq war for this country while on duty, and to give my deepest condolences to the families from whom they have been taken. Their commitment to our keeping our freedoms, and ultimately their sacrifice for the United Kingdom, will not be forgotten. I also extend my gratitude to the 220,000 personnel who served and wore the Queen’s uniform overseas in numerous tours of duty of the southern regions and Basra, some of whom now serve in this House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), and the hon. Members for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) and for Wells (James Heappey). I know the whole House would agree that we owe them a great deal for their service, and their continued public service in bringing their expertise to the Floor of the Chamber.

Secondly, I thank Sir John Chilcot and his team for their due diligence and forensic detailing of such a complex matter. At the time of the Iraq war and in the period immediately preceding it, I, like many others, was not a Member of this House. I was working for the NHS as a clinical scientist, and can vividly remember the conversations I had with my NHS colleagues around that time. People I worked with in the laboratory were convinced that Saddam Hussein had chemical and biological weapons at his disposal that could wipe us out in 45 minutes. There was real fear among my friends and colleagues, and many of them supported the action taken by the then Prime Minister. Personally, I was very dubious about the justification for war, and I was concerned that we were being led into action without a second resolution.

For me, the most telling phrase of the executive summary of the Chilcot report is paragraph 339, which states:

“diplomatic options had not been exhausted. The point had not been reached where military action was the last resort.”

That one point, which was also quoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), encapsulates my feelings at the time, although of course I have a great deal of respect for the thorough and painstaking work done by Sir John Chilcot, and hope that my comments will be taken in the spirit in which they are intended. I am most certainly not presenting myself as an expert in this field.

As I have said, I did not support the Iraq war, nor was I a Member of this House at the time, but I hope that I now have a better understanding of the great difficulties involved in taking these daunting but necessary decisions. However, for me, the inquiry highlights and underlines the key lesson, which is the absolute need to learn from the grave mistake of triggering an event for which we had not fully planned, and from which we did not have a coherent exit strategy. If we as elected Members and a collective legislative body are to grasp fully the extent of those failures, now is the time to do so. We must acknowledge the errors of Iraq and implement the lessons in today’s context.

That context came 13 days before the inquiry report was published in the form of Brexit. Some Members have infamously said outside this House that the public
are “fed up with experts”. That, as with Iraq, is flawed intelligence. Now more than ever, the UK needs experts. We face a tumultuous and treacherous period over the coming years as we negotiate our exit from the European Union. The Government, who called the referendum, did not have a contingency plan for leaving the EU, and neither did the Brexiteers, who campaigned so ardent for us to leave.

Both the EU referendum and the invasion of Iraq were peddled and pushed on mistruths, and presented with a certainty that was not justified. The era of post-truth politics that we seem to have entered over the past two months can be traced back to the hyperbole of the “45 minutes to Armageddon” document, which warned of an imminent threat from Saddam Hussain. Now is the time to turn back that tide of tirades against the truth, and that process should begin here in Westminster.

Sir John Chilcot wrote that “assessments…were not challenged, and they should have been.”

He added:

“Despite explicit warnings, the consequences...were underestimated,” and that inadequate planning led to fatal errors. Let us not fall into the same perilous trap as we fell into 13 years ago. Some decisions cannot be reversed, but lessons can and should be learned from the Chilcot inquiry, and the parallels are here in front of us now.

I conclude by echoing the words of Winston Churchill:

“Plans are of little importance, but planning is essential.”

3.33 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate on an issue that should have been addressed long ago. Those responsible for such an affront to basic standards of trust and integrity should be held to account. I was interested to hear the speech by the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), and I absolutely agree with him and my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) in their call for action in this House against Tony Blair.

There is a growing sense in the UK of a protected elite who are above the law, too often because the law seems drafted to permit things that most of us would regard as wholly unacceptable. Voters have watched as organised theft goes unpunished when it is done through manipulation of the financial system. They have seen companies stripped of assets, leaving pensions unfunded and care home residents fearing eviction.

Thanks to this report, a former Prime Minister is exposed as having taken this country to war on grounds that were, it seems, deliberately set in train. Tony Blair’s now infamous memo with the phrase, “I will be with you, whatever” seems tantamount to subcontracting to President Bush the decision to invade Iraq, committing UK troops to back his decision, whatever. If anywhere in the 2.6 million-word Chilcot report clarifies a time when he thinks Tony Blair reconciled that private commitment to war with a public statement, I am yet to find it.

When this House was recalled in September 2002 to consider Mr Blair’s dossier, he said that Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction programme was “active, detailed and growing”. That was simply part of a plan orchestrated by Bush and Blair to take Iraq and the international community to the brink of war, and then push them over. Always the wordsmith, Mr Blair called this his “clever strategy” in a paper sent to President Bush, suggesting it was a strategy for regime change that built up over time to the point where military action could be taken if necessary. It seems that Blair owes more to Robert Maxwell than just the opportunity to rewrite evidence against him before anyone else gets a chance to see it. If, as a constituent said to me at a surgery recently, you are going to tell a whopper, make sure you do it in plain sight so that no one can accuse you of concealing anything—except the truth.

It is instructive to remember who the cheerleaders for Blair’s action were. The inquiry notes that an editorial in the News of the World claimed that the dossier would be as devastating as it was vital, and show that Saddam had enough chemical and biological stocks to attack the entire planet, and the missile technology to deliver them. That Government-planted story was a lesson in building exactly the kind of narrative that the dossier was designed to back up, by a Prime Minister intent on feeling the “hand of history” on his shoulder. Instead of the hand of history, it is surely right that the hand of Parliament lands on Mr Blair’s shoulder and returns him to this House to account for his disastrous legacy.

The US strategy for Iraq was described in 2001 by General Wes Clark as to leave Iraq so unstable and chaotic that it did not pose a powerful threat in the region. Thirteen years later, Iraq is indeed unstable and chaotic, and the consequent sectarianism and hatred pose a powerful threat to the region and much further afield. Those consequences cast a long shadow over our age and will not easily be forgiven or forgotten.

At the heart of this decision-making process, we were sending the men and women of our armed forces into conflict. It is incumbent on the Government and the defence staff to ensure that troops sent into battle are properly equipped for the task and their welfare given due consideration. Therefore, I was disappointed to hear General Sir Mike Jackson’s comments on the BBC on the inadequacy of the equipment available to the armed forces in Iraq, saying simply, “We had what we had”.

The MOD was not given the green light to obtain supplies for the operation until Christmas 2002.

Some of the deficiencies were not unique to the Iraq operation. There should have been standard items for a country whose leaders regularly boast of using our armed forces to punch above our weight. The evidence is that the Government wantonly ran ahead of the armed services’ capacity to deliver without being under-resourced and overstretched. Given the background, no self-respecting commander would want his forces on the battlefield without adequate nuclear, biological and chemical protection, but that is exactly what the Government required of the troops.

The National Audit Office reported major deficiencies in the supply of these protective suits, unusable residual vapour detector kits and a 40% shortfall in tactical nerve-agent detection systems. In this Chamber, the Defence Secretary reassured members that there was at least one nuclear, biological, chemical suit for all personnel. Of course, if the risk of chemical or biological weapons...
was being taken seriously, many more suits than that would have been required. In reality, personnel were given suits that did not fit.

The MOD noted that troops and equipment were probably in the same country, but not necessarily in close proximity. In fact, severe shortages of both desert suits and desert boots meant that sand and heat were the real problems for the British forces. Why did it take the MOD until weeks before deployment to find out that that protective gear was in short supply or had been left in storage, unserviced and unusable?

The evidence given by Gordon Brown highlights the financing assumptions for the MOD. Basically, it is funded to be ready in case there is military action. However, all costs of military action are met by the Treasury, thus encouraging the MOD to stretch its budget by saving on maintenance of existing kit. Some of the kit needed in Iraq had been bought for the 1991 Gulf war, and appears to have lain untouched for over 10 years. How many more items on the MOD inventory are in such condition? It also meant that combat-critical items needed to be procured at the last minute. However, in the case of Iraq, no one was authorised to start the procurement process until both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown gave the go-ahead.

General Sir Mike Jackson noted, days before the invasion:

“In the name of accounting orthodoxy, we lack basic items, such as desert clothing.”

Clearly, these are key issues to bear in mind in our debate next week on Trident. How can a defence budget that can barely sustain basic equipment, and that is based on ever-declining personnel numbers, stretch to accommodate the UK’s own weapons of mass destruction?

Of course, the other way in which the MOD stretches its budget is simply to overstretched members of our armed forces, sending them on deployment more often or for longer periods than should be the case. The House will note that the report highlights considerable overstretched on the Army throughout the Iraq war and occupation. The UK Government aim to reduce the strength of the regular Army by 2020 by an amount that is virtually the same size as the initial land force deployment in Iraq. Clearly, with such a reduction, the potential for overstretched on the Army has increased considerably, but the computerised personnel system introduced in 2007 makes it impossible to measure overstretched.

I would like to close by considering the armed forces waiting in Kuwait for word to move into Iraq, among them the officers and men of the Black Watch. In action, soldiers work around many problems caused by the failure of others. However, special contempt must be reserved for top brass who dodge responsibility for failures of kit by blaming poor, benighted end users.

Three days into the Iraq war, the chain gun on a Warrior armoured vehicle caused serious injuries to one of our men. In the face of compelling evidence to the contrary, senior officers blamed the Warrior gunner, my constituent Tam Henderson. His appeal hearing heard of mechanical and electrical faults with the Warrior vehicle and the chain gun, and he was cleared of all charges, but senior officers held a board of inquiry in secret and pointed the finger of blame once more. When someone alerted Captain Henderson to that cowardly act, the MOD caved in and settled out of court. Nevertheless, I am told the MOD will do nothing to remove that self-serving finding from its records. Captain Henderson bravely allowed me to highlight his fight for justice in today’s debate, but I will seek an opportunity to raise the issue more fully after the recess. It is an irony indeed that those who served in Iraq face such injustice, when those responsible for sending them there face no justice at all.

3.41 pm

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald). I do not necessarily agree with all the sentiments she expressed, but I agree with many of the points that she made.

The Chilcot report was sombre and sobering reading. I am glad that it was commissioned. I welcome its openness and the debate about it, and I wonder what I would have done had I been here at the time of the vote. I think most hon. Members know this, but for those who do not, I was a serviceman until 1984, which was well before that time. We should always show our sympathy to the armed personnel who served, especially those who lost their lives or were injured, but also to those in the middle east who are still suffering from the consequences of the conflict.

All who served in the armed forces are proud of how well respected they are the world over. We were always brought up to use whatever equipment we were given and to do the best with it, but one lesson that we must learn from the Chilcot inquiry is that, if the equipment is no good, there is a point at which we really cannot do our job. My first point is, therefore, to ask the Defence Minister whether we will make sure that senior Army officers, naval officers and RAF officers are allowed to speak out. Will we ensure that there is never any feeling—caused by political pressure or perceived political pressure—that they cannot speak out early and be listened to? Sometimes, I feel that, when people reach the top, they feel that they cannot speak out and say what is needed. It is evident from the inquiry that that may have been behind certain decisions.

Another key area that we should learn from and watch is the influence of the press, which has been touched on. We are always told that it is dangerous to criticise the press, but they must examine themselves and ask how much of what went wrong in Iraq was due to their pressure. At the same time, we must look at how we use the press, and at how senior politicians push the press to do what they want. There must be more openness so that people feel able to criticise.

I was lucky enough to visit the Kurds in Iraq last year. Seeing the internally displaced persons and all that is happening reminds us that, as we know from the Chilcot report, we did not prepare properly for what was going to happen afterwards. We have a duty. We do part of that duty, and there is good foreign aid going to Iraq, but the IDPs need a legal status and to be properly looked after. We need to try to make up for the mess we have left.

Those are the key issues I wanted to raise today. It is right that this House always looks at the place of the United Kingdom in the world. We did not deal with things in Rwanda or Srebrenica, or perhaps early on.
enough in Syria. We should always take our rightful place in the world, but we should also always follow the wishes of this House.

3.45 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): It has been a great pleasure—privilege might be a better word—to sit through the entirety of the debate today and much of yesterday’s debate. In particular, it has been a privilege to listen to those hon. Members who have been here since 2003 or, in many cases, before, during the lead up to the Iraq conflict. One thing I have noticed about the contributions from people who have been here for that length of time is how some of the emotions are still raw. Members on both sides of House still feel strongly about the way they were led into voting for the conflict or how they had to delve around to find the truth before deciding how to vote.

Any reasonable reading of the Chilcot report would conclude that this Parliament was never at any stage given the whole, unalloyed truth about what was in preparation. Indeed, as I was listening to many of the contributions today, including those of the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and of the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), I wrote down a few words to try to summarise some of their points. What I have written down is that the then Prime Minister did not seem to allow the evidence, analysis or expert opinion to get in the way of his intuition or pre-chosen narrative. For me, that is at the centre of the issue—the attempt to deny the exposure of the truth of the matter, as known at the time.

As this House knows, a total of 179 British service personnel were killed in the Iraq conflict. It is less well known that, according to the Ministry of Defence, there were a total of 5,970 casualties, including deaths, up to July 2009. I pay tribute to the courage of those particularly important for the families? Locally, we grieve Guardsman Stephen Fergusson of the 1st Battalion the Scots Guards, who lost his life aged 31. I pay special tribute to him.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I speak as the wife of a former member of our armed forces personnel. Does my hon. Friend agree that justice and acknowledgment are particularly important for the families? Locally, we grieve Guardsman Stephen Fergusson of the 1st Battalion the Scots Guards, who lost his life aged 31. I pay special tribute to him.

Roger Mullin: I thank my hon. Friend very much for that intervention. I am sure we all wish to pay tribute to the constituent she named.

People living with the consequences—those appalling injuries—need our support and care, but they also deserve justice and the truth. Over the past few days, I have heard one or two Members wonder whether it would be a waste of time to hold the former Prime Minister to account. I would answer that by asking, is justice ever a waste of time? I think not.

I was not a Member in 2003. Like some, I opposed the war at the time, but many people supported it. I have not had time to read the whole report—I have not been to a good enough speed-reading course to accomplish that—but I have attempted to focus on a few issues that I am particularly interested in, not least because I chair the all-party group on explosive weapons, and I am interested in some of the consequences of conflict and in issues such as reconstruction and preparedness for the aftermath of war.

We now know that, as UK troops poured into Iraq on 20 March 2003, the ill-conceived hope in Whitehall was of a quick victory over Saddam Hussein’s regime, followed by a relatively benign security environment, which of course never existed. Victory in the immediate conflict unleashed a vicious insurgency that some have estimated claimed 250,000 lives or more. That should not have been a surprise. As Chilcot argues, UK hopes were exposed as hopelessly vague, under-resourced and compounded by a complete Government planning failure. Indeed, the report finds that the UK Government’s plans were “wholly inadequate”.

For that failing, Sir John Chilcot laid particular criticism at the door of Tony Blair, and stated: “He did not ensure that there was a flexible, realistic and fully resourced plan that integrated UK military and civilian contributions, and addressed the known risks.”

Before the troops rolled in on February 2003, the Joint Intelligence Committee—the overarching body that brought together the work of agencies such as MI6 and GCHQ—concluded:

“The broader threat from Islamist terrorists will also increase in the event of war, reflecting intensified anti-US/Anti-Western sentiment in the Muslim world, including among Muslim communities in the West.”

A little over two years later, London would become the target of the 7/7 attacks, yet there has been reluctance in some quarters to accept any link between that and the invasion of Iraq, despite the intelligence that was given years earlier.

Before becoming an MP, I worked in places that had suffered from earlier conflict, albeit not to the same extent as Iraq. There is absolutely no shortage of historical information to show that severe conflicts throw up not merely economic, infrastructure and security challenges, but cultural challenges, which are sometimes seen in the strengthening of sectarian attachments of many sorts. Sir John found that the UK Government had completely failed to appreciate the “magnitude of the task of stabilising, administering and reconstructing Iraq.”

He commented:

“The scale of the UK effort in post-conflict Iraq never matched the scale of the challenge. Whitehall Departments and their Ministers failed to put collective weight behind the task.”

What may have begun as a failure of leadership by a few had become a collective failure of the entire Government. It has become clear that there was one central strand to UK strategy post-conflict, which was to leave Iraq as soon as possible. As Sir John put it, “In practice, the UK’s most consistent strategic objective in relation to Iraq was to reduce the level of its deployed forces.”

The report found that the Government failed to protect their own troops with appropriate kit and vehicles, as my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) explained a short time ago. Sir John stated that the Government failed to act against known dangers faced by our troops, such as the use of IEDs, and he castigated the MOD at the time for failing to apply appropriate armed vehicles with the appropriate haste. He argued that the troops “did not have sufficient resources” to conduct simultaneous long-term operations in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2006 onwards.
[Roger Mullin]

On Monday this week, I was in discussions with senior staff at Imperial College’s centre for blast injury studies. I was surprised to learn that as far back as the 1970s and the Rhodesian conflict, as it was known at the time, reports and studies demonstrated to the MOD what it needed to do to upgrade and provide better equipment for armed personnel in such conflicts. At that time, the lessons were ignored. This time, the lessons from Chilcot must not be ignored.

Dr Julian Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is making a most interesting speech. Before he leaves his list of failures, may I remind him of a point I raised in July 2003? Another failure is that, 13 days after the fall of Baghdad, it was still possible for journalists to go into the gutted headquarters of the Iraqi Foreign Ministry and intelligence services and pick up classified documents that were available for anyone to take away. One would have thought that if someone was determined to find out about the truth on WMDs and other matters, those ministries and agency headquarters should have been the first targets to be searched by intelligence teams.

Roger Mullin: The right hon. Gentleman makes a wonderfully telling point. I like his use of one word in particular: “if”. If they had been interested in finding out the truth about WMDs, these things would have been found much earlier and taken care of much earlier. The fact that there was no planning to do that tells its own tale, I fear.

Returning to my opening points about the people still alive today who suffered terrible injuries in the conflict, I would like to end, with your permission, Mr Speaker, with a quote from The BMJ only two days ago:

“No matter how good the short term care, nothing will remove the enduring effects of the deaths and the physical and psychological injuries. The true legacy of the conflict for individuals and wider society in both the UK and Iraq may not be evident for many years to come.”

That is why we need to learn all the lessons that have to be learned. We need to hold those to account who deserve to be held to account.

Mr Graham Allen: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would it be in order to put on the record Members’ thanks for the fact that you have sat through this debate the very beginning for the whole two days? [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”] It has been much appreciated by Members on all sides of the House.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, which obviously was unsolicited. It is something for which I am very grateful and I thank colleagues for their response. As far as I am concerned, it is a matter of duty. I feel it is important and I want to hear what people have to say. It is my privilege to hear colleagues.

3.58 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) took the words right out of my mouth with regard to your presence, Mr Speaker. One can tell how good a debate has been when Members find themselves nodding vigorously, no matter from which side of the House the points are being made. I think that that has happened quite a lot over the past two days.

I am honoured to be closing this debate on behalf of the Opposition. The Chilcot report is an extraordinary piece of work and I hope the whole House will join me in congratulating Sir John Chilcot on his efforts. He took a fair amount of flak during the lengthy writing of it, but it seems clear that it has been worth the wait. The report is in the very highest and noblest traditions of our country. It has unflinchingly shone a light both on crucial decisions made by our leaders and on how those decisions were made. It has not ducked from shining that light at the very highest levels of our Government—indeed, at the very top.

It would be naive to suppose that complete openness is always possible in government, especially over matters as grave as going to war. None the less, openness will always ensure that our policies have a firm moral foundation. As a great American jurist once said, “If the broad light of day could be let in upon men’s actions, if would purify them as the sun disinfects”.

The report has let sunlight in on much that would prefer to remain hidden. It is the most comprehensive and devastating critique we have had of the individual, collective and systemic errors that added up to the failure in Iraq—a failure whose consequences we are still dealing with and will have to deal with for many years to come.

I wish to pay tribute to comments by hon. Members on both sides of the House. Over two days, we have heard contributions from, among others, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on the opportunities the report provides to learn lessons for the future, from the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who emphasised the need for war to be seen always as a measure of last resort, and from the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), who ably chairs the Intelligence and Security Committee and spoke with particular insight about some of the legal questions involved in the decision to go to war and about the failures of intelligence, which were also raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett), who has served as Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and therefore speaks with considerable authority on these issues.

Many Members, including the hon. Members for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) and for South Dorset (Richard Drax), talked about problems with military equipment, as did the hon. and gallant Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) in what I thought was one of the finest speeches of the debate. The hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) were among the many contributors yesterday who spoke about the lack of adequate planning for the post-war reconstruction phase. As the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) pointed out, the same mistake was repeated in Libya, where the Government spent 13 times more on the military campaign than on post-war reconstruction.

The hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) made the case for better leadership on such matters and urged that the House and the Government learn from the Iraq
The Government’s continued lack of transparency on this issue is troubling. I urge the Secretary of State, in the light of the report, to look again at how his Department monitors and collates information on civilian casualties.

The exposure of equipment failures is one of the gravest findings in the report. Chilcot sheds new light on this by documenting the sheer scale of the problem. Shortages of helicopters and armoured vehicles had terrible consequences. Day after day we saw Snatch Land Rovers that were designed for riot duty in Northern Ireland blown to bits by huge roadside bombs. There were also shortages of uniforms, boots and even such basic necessities as toilet paper. Some units even had to borrow rations from the Americans; one unit became known as “the Borrowers”. Some of the soldiers who died in Iraq were still teenagers, and it is a disgrace that they were sent there so woefully prepared. Although we died in Iraq were still teenagers, and it is a disgrace that shortages of uniforms, boots and even such Land Rovers that were designed for riot duty in Northern terriblemente. Day after day we saw Snatch Shortages of helicopters and armoured vehicles had terrible consequences. Day after day we saw Snatch Shortages of helicopters and armoured vehicles had terrible consequences. Day after day we saw Snatch

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I have spoken about some of the specific failings identified in the report, but I must also speak of the much wider failings that a report of this scale and quality makes clear, such as the failure of this House sufficiently to hold the Executive to account on matters as grave as taking this country to war. Chilcot tells us that we must never allow a rush to war to blind us to facts or their absence. We must never allow a debate to be closed down with snide imputations of a lack of patriotism, or by the kind of macho posturing that suggests that those who urge caution, who demand evidence and who want proof when allegations of the gravest seriousness are made are somehow cowardly or undeserving of a voice.

The guardianship of this country’s future and the future safety of the world are issues that require not the posturing bravado of adolescence, but mature wisdom and a readiness to accept that every voice in this Chamber is worthy of our fullest respect, because those voices have been sent here as representatives of the British people, in all their variety and complexity, and we all speak for Britain here. If we speak again of a rush to bomb the odious Government of President Assad, we should not be derided as supporters of the Assad regime. When, just two years later, we are told that we must now bomb President Assad’s enemies in Daesh and we ask the question, “How will this bombing achieve our aims?”, we must not be told that we are soft on terrorism. We are demanding evidence of a coherent long-term plan that is backed with credible evidence and sufficient resources to achieve a lasting peace, founded on justice.

I am not a pacifist. My grandfather, of whose armed service I am deeply proud, was a paratrooper in the Normandy landings, and I have already mentioned my own service. I will always demand, however, the highest standard of proof for taking our country to war, and I will never apologise for that. These are literally matters of life and death, and the British people deserve better than political posturing.

Ultimately, if we cannot face and accept the consequences of our actions, we cannot learn the lessons and we cannot make wiser choices in the future. I hope that when we discuss issues of the gravest possible importance next week—those relating to Britain’s nuclear capability—this House will do so in a spirit of due humility and awareness of our shortcomings. We are not infallible, and when we are making choices of such gravity, we must speak with the very best part of ourselves and not stoop to political point scoring.

Let me conclude by quoting the words of the former Foreign Secretary and now deceased Member for Livingston, Robin Cook. In his resignation speech, he said:

“The longer that I have served in this place, the greater the respect I have for the good sense and collective wisdom of the British people. On Iraq, I believe that the prevailing mood of the British people is sound. They do not doubt that Saddam is a brutal dictator, but they are not persuaded that he is a clear and present danger to Britain. They want inspections to be given a chance, and they suspect that they are being pushed too quickly into conflict by a US Administration with an agenda of its own. Above all, they are uneasy at Britain going on a limb on a military adventure without a broader international coalition and against the hostility of many of our traditional allies.”—[Official Report, 17 March 2003; Vol. 401, c. 728.]

I want to pay a personal tribute to the families of our troops who died for their dogged and persistent pursuit of the truth about these equipment failures. Their steadfastness to the cause was heroic. I and everyone who saw some active service in the years that followed owe them a deep debt of gratitude. We got the kit their sons and daughters did not get. I, for one, will never forget the commitment to this cause that they showed. It undoubtedly saved many lives, and I hope that that knowledge can bring them some small consolation.

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There it is in a nutshell: we went to war without the support of international alliances, institutions or our allies, without sufficient evidence and without the support of the British people. Some Members saw that, and they are to be congratulated on their honesty and moral integrity in saying so at the time. We were railroaded into war. That was shameful, and it must not happen again.

4.10 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon):

This has indeed been a considered and moving debate, as befits such a serious subject. I believe that more than 50 Members have contributed over the last two days, and I join them in thanking Sir John and his colleagues, including the late Sir Martin Gilbert, for their immense efforts. They have produced a report that I think we all now agree is comprehensive, accurate, and an unvarnished record of the events, and they have been unremitting in their efforts to understand the causes and consequences of the Iraq war and its aftermath. We are all in their debt.

I hope that members of the armed forces and their families are able to find some measure of consolation in the report’s acknowledgement of their enormous service. Our thoughts remain with them. We should bear in mind what Sir John says about the efforts of the men and women of the armed forces: that the initial war-fighting phase was a military success. They did fight to help topple a tyrant who had murdered hundreds of thousands of his own people, and the subsequent failures in the campaign, at whoever’s door they are laid, cannot and should not be laid at the door of those who did the fighting on our behalf.

However, Sir John also makes it clear that the United Kingdom did not achieve its overall strategy objectives in Iraq. There were too many challenges in too many different areas. There was a lack of leadership across Government, and there was too much group-think in our military, security and intelligence cultures, which stopped short of challenging key decisions. That point has been made many times over the last couple of days. There was flawed intelligence, which led to assertions—particularly in relation to WMD—that could not be justified. There was a fatal lack of post-war planning, and lessons from previous conflicts and exercises had not been properly learned. We also failed, as the campaign unravelled, to adapt to the changing situation on the ground, and there were significant equipment shortfalls for our troops, listed in some detail by the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis). There was much in that campaign that—whatever else we do—we must try to avoid in the future.

It will not, I think, be possible for me to refer to every single speech made over the last couple of days. The hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) picked out some of the more memorable. We have heard speeches of anger and speeches of remorse, and we have heard thought-provoking speeches about the overall effect of the Iraq war on our process and our political culture.

We have heard speeches from those who played significant roles at the time. The right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) spoke very illuminatingly of the need for humility, given that so many of those who were involved professionally were able to reach the same conclusions without properly challenging the existing culture, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) spoke of the drive to converge our views with those of the United States. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell) underlined the importance of planning for reconstruction in any military action. The House also had the benefit of the military experience of my hon. Friends the Members for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) and for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). I was particularly struck by the speech made by the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr. McFadden), who reminded the House that Islamic terrorism did not start in 2003; it was there long before that, and other countries were also engaged in trying to deal with it.

The question the House has to ask itself is this: given that we all want to avoid this happening again in the future, have there been sufficient, significant changes for the better? I suggest to the House that there have been some changes for the better. First, we in Government are better co-ordinated. We now have the National Security Council, which ensures that decision-making is dealt with in a joined-up way across Government. The NSC includes not only Ministers from the main Departments, but the Chief of the Defence Staff, the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, the heads of the intelligence services, relevant senior officials and the Attorney General.

Dr Julian Lewis: The Secretary of State has just listed the membership of the National Security Council. While it is revealing that all the intelligence services are individually represented, it is a fact that all the armed forces are represented only by the Chief of the Defence Staff. Will he give consideration to the Defence Committee’s suggestion that the Chief of Staff Committee could serve more usefully if it was constituted as the military sub-committee of the NSC?

Michael Fallon: I heard my right hon. Friend’s speech earlier today, in which he made that point at some length. I caution him against over-complicating the structure we have and setting up sub-committees of it. The armed forces are represented through the Chief of the Defence Staff, who attends not only the NSC, but the officials’ meeting that precedes it.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): My right hon. Friend is, I am delighted to say, serving in his current role under his second Prime Minister, and I trust he will serve under several more yet. [Interruption.] If we keep having leadership crises. As he has experience of Cabinet Government and the NSC, and as he remembers serving in government decades ago under former Prime Ministers, will he, with the new leader of the Government, consider the possibility of the Cabinet sitting for slightly longer than one and a half hours each week, particularly when pressing issues are on the agenda, and of more readily having individual briefings before issues are considered at Cabinet?

Similarly, will my right hon. Friend consider whether the NSC might be more flexible as to the length of meetings, whether briefings might be given to members before the NSC sits, and whether matters might be
Michael Fallon: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend, particularly for his kind words. I am now serving my fourth Conservative Prime Minister; I do not think I have quite matched my right hon. and learned Friend’s record, but I am closing in on it. I will not be drawn on the possibility of serving yet another term, given that my right hon. Friend the new Prime Minister has only been in office for a day. She and I did sit together on the NSC, as well as in Cabinet, and one can always look at these things again. It is not for me to instruct the new Prime Minister on how to run her Cabinet, but I will certainly ensure that my right hon. and learned Friend’s suggestion is passed on.

The NSC is a significant improvement on what went before it, in my right hon. and learned Friend’s time in government, and it is certainly an improvement on the kind of sofa government that the Chilcot report exposes. The NSC does not operate in a vacuum. The National Security Adviser, who attends it, is now a well-established position in Government, supported by a strong team, and the NSC and the adviser are supported by a structure of cross-government boards and sub-committees, to which the Ministry of Defence makes a full contribution. To answer the point raised by the Chairman of the Defence Committee, there is no shortage of ways in which the views of the chiefs are brought forward in that structure.

Dr Julian Lewis: I see a slight contradiction in the Secretary of State saying that it would over-complicate the machinery of the National Security Council if the heads of the armed services were allowed to form one of its sub-committees, given that there is evidently no shortage of other sub-committees. The fact remains that it is easier for politicians with bees in their bonnets to sweep aside the views of the Chief of the Defence Staff as a single individual, which appears to have happened in the case of Libya, than it is for them to sweep aside the views of the heads of the armed forces collectively. I wish that the Secretary of State would not be so resistant on this point.

Michael Fallon: As I have said, the heads of the armed forces are represented on the National Security Council by the Chief of the Defence Staff, and the Chief of the Defence Staff who has been serving up to now is certainly not likely to be disregarded by the politicians who sit on the committee. Both he and his successor—I hope that the House will welcome the arrival of the new Chief of the Defence Staff today—are well able to hold their own against the politicians.

Clive Lewis: Would the Secretary of State acknowledge that Baroness Neville-Jones, one of the architects of the NSC, has said that the secretariat that co-ordinates the NSC is understaffed and under-resourced? Another criticism is that there is a lack of outside expertise being brought into the NSC, and that more use could be made of such experts.

Michael Fallon: I read the Baroness’s speech, and I advise all Members to have a look at the debate on this matter in the other place. It had some memorable contributions, including from people who were actively involved at the time. The point that the hon. Gentleman makes about the need for external expertise has been made before. External expertise is of course available to the different Departments, and I am convinced that the new machinery is a massive improvement on what was there before.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I think that the Secretary of State has laid to rest the canard that the NSC operates without expertise, but I should like to reinforce that point. It is evident from the 2010 example of the strategic defence and security review that we on the NSC conducted, and from subsequent events, that expertise from the greatest experts in the country is frequently heard and always available to the NSC. Such expertise also populates the significant briefing papers that go before the NSC and informs the judgments that it makes.

Michael Fallon: I can confirm that that is exactly the position. There is no shortage of briefing for members of the NSC. They are able to bring that expertise to the regular meetings of the council and to question the experts who are present. The recent strategic defence and security review shows how a cross-Whitehall approach is being implemented in practice and leading to better decision making.

Tom Brake: On that point about cross-departmental arrangements working more effectively, does the Secretary of State feel that any of the lessons identified in Chilcot in relation to reconstruction in Iraq might already have been fed through in relation to what happened in Libya? It is not obvious that that is the case.

Michael Fallon: I shall talk about the lesson on the importance of planning for reconstruction in a moment. I just want to finish this important point about the machinery of government.

The Ministry of Defence has revamped its strategy and policy making with the institution of an annual defence plan that reflects the outcomes of the strategic defence and security reviews, with senior leaders in the Ministry being individually held to account for their role in delivering it, and a defence strategy group, chaired by the permanent secretary and the Chief of the Defence Staff, to address how Defence can best contribute to delivering defence and security policy objectives.

Mr Baron: I am listening carefully to what my right hon. Friend is saying, but this is not just an issue of how best to encourage communication and expertise within the system; Chilcot was also saying that there was a lack of investment and proper sighting of events on the ground. That can be put right only through long-term investment to ensure that we are better sighted, so that we have a better idea of what is actually happening on the ground and the consequences of our actions. Does he agree that that is another important lesson to take from the Chilcot report?
Michael Fallon: Yes, I do. Defence intelligence and the gathering of information on the ground have improved and are more available to those taking the key decisions back in London.

Ian C. Lucas: This is an important area, but the right hon. Gentleman has focused almost exclusively on the Executive. One of the most important lessons of Chilcot is that the most effective opposition to the decision, which many now accept to be wrong, was from the Back Benches. When the Front Benches agree, group-think—to use his own phrase—applies. The lesson is that we need to listen to independent-minded Back Benchers who present their views to Government honestly and passionately regardless of the consequences for their careers and who make difficult decisions that Ministers need to listen to much more closely in future.

Michael Fallon: I accept that. I was here at the time and voted in that particular Division. It is important that the Government listen to their Back Benchers. We were not in government then, but it is important that Members are free to speak their minds independently. Indeed, they have done so in the debate that we have had over two days—on both sides of the argument.

There are those who still maintain that the action taken in Iraq, although it did not turn out as well as we wanted, was justified and right.

Alex Salmond: Speaking as a Back Bencher, the right hon. Gentleman’s new colleague the Brexit Secretary, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), said that in situations of peace and war the House must rely on the Prime Minister of the day telling “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”—[Official Report, 13 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 362.]

Does the Defence Secretary agree?

Michael Fallon: Members and Ministers should speak the truth in this particular House, but whether the Prime Minister of the day deliberately misled the House was investigated exhaustively by Sir John Chilcot in the report and I do not want to add any more to what he said.

I turn now to the issue raised by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) about stabilisation. Since the Iraq war, the Government have increasingly focused first on prevention rather than intervention. We have been helping to build capability with partners and tackling the problems of fragile states at source, which has been possible only because we are now spending 0.7% of our GDP on international development. By helping fragile states to promote good governance, tackle corruption, and build capacity in defence and security forces, we can stop crises turning to the chaos that we have seen. That requires insight and understanding, often into complex situations. We have set up the cross-Government conflict stability and security fund, building on the conflict pool that had been in place for some time and supporting delivery of country or regional NSC strategies.

All that promotes a much stronger culture of cross-Government working on strategy, policy and delivery in fragile and conflict-affected countries. An example of our success in that so far was the recent deployment to Sierra Leone to combat Ebola, where diplomats, the military and officials from the Department for International Development worked alongside each other. The stabilisation unit that we set up has continued to develop, so we now have experts on hand to deploy in post-conflict situations anywhere in the world, at short notice. I have seen for myself how civilian advisers are now routinely part of military exercises, ensuring that military and civilian staff gain experience of working together before they are deployed, so that development and humanitarian needs get the consideration and attention they need, alongside the military planning.

We are now trying to make sure our armed forces are properly equipped and resourced. Not only are we meeting the NATO commitment to spend 2% of our GDP on defence, but our defence budget is growing for the first time in six years. That is on the back of the successful efforts we have been making since 2010 to return financial discipline to the Ministry of Defence and balance the defence budget. That is the foundation for the strong focus now on delivering an affordable 10-year equipment programme, allowing us to invest in the right equipment for our armed forces. That programme will total at least £178 billion on new military equipment over the next decade.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am glad that the Secretary of State has come to this point about members of the armed forces and their equipment. Will he expand on how this learning opportunity will support those who come back from conflict—crucially, the reservists, who take up much of that challenge and who fell off the radar after Iraq?

Michael Fallon: We have taken a lot of measures to involve the reserves more closely with the regulars now. After Iraq, we have been learning more rapidly the lessons from each deployment, particularly those from Afghanistan, to ensure that in future we do not have to wait for the kind of report that Sir John Chilcot has produced, and we are able to learn the lessons as we go and as units return, so that they can be applied to the next units taking up those roles.

Strategic defence reviews take balance of investment decisions, including where our main equipment priorities lie. Routinely, decisions on how that money will then be invested rest with the service chiefs, giving them the freedom, and the responsibility, to make decisions on how best to apply their resources, and obliging them to be very clear about where they are carrying risk in respect of potential equipment failures or shortfall. Where changing circumstances or unexpected threats lead to shortfalls, we should be ready and able, quickly and effectively, to make good any shortcomings.

The Chilcot report recognises that the MOD and the Treasury, between them, worked hard to develop and refine the urgent operational requirements process. As the former Prime Minister told this House, that process did deliver results and new, improved equipment into theatre quickly in the Afghanistan campaign, responding immediately to the needs of our armed forces there. One of Chilcot’s most troubling observations is the lack back then of a clear focus of responsibility for identifying capability gaps during enduring operations. The new post of Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff for Military Capability that has since been established fulfils that role.
As well as properly equipping and resourcing our people, the Government have a duty to ensure the welfare of our armed forces and their families, and then to ensure that they suffer no disadvantage when they return to civilian life. By putting the armed forces covenant into law and committing resources to it, we are making sure that all those who put their lives on the line for this country get the help and support they need.

But however much we have done, and however much things have changed and improved since the Iraq campaign, the question for this House is to judge whether or not we have done enough. My answer is: no, of course we have not yet done enough. It is evident that the Chilcot report contains many harsh lessons still for us to learn. Given its length and forensic detail, it will take us some more time to analyse and to do it full justice. What is clear to me is that we now need to take a long, hard look at our decision-making processes and our culture to satisfy ourselves that misjudgments similar to those made at the time could not recur.

Pete Wishart: The Secretary of State is right that we must take account of all those things, but surely the public expect somebody to be held accountable for what was the biggest foreign policy disaster, probably, since the war. What is he going to do about that? The public demand to know that somebody will be held responsible for what happened.

Michael Fallon: The Chilcot report itself holds to account those who were involved and took the key decisions, and it makes its judgments on them. It is for them, not for me, to respond to those judgments and to account for the actions and the way in which they took their decisions at that time.

On the decision-making culture, the detail of the committees and the machinery of government which we discussed a few moments ago is not the stuff of headlines and speeches, but Chilcot shows us that some of these internal procedures of government are important. He sets out in pretty stark terms what happens when those structures—and the opportunities that they provide for the proper flow of information and challenge—are missing or are bypassed.

In defence, we have transformed in recent years our approach to risk. We have a clear focus of responsibility in each key area. We have designated risk duty holders and it is their responsibility to come to me if they believe that the levels of risk in their areas are becoming excessive. I expect military chiefs and commanders now to show the same degree of rigour and transparency with respect to operational planning.

Our organisation and culture must not prevent our people from challenging and questioning institutional assumptions, even if those assumptions are made by their superiors. That was a point eloquently made yesterday by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), and it was made again by the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) today.

That view is fully shared by the current Chiefs of Staff—each of whom served in different roles during the Iraq campaign, including the outgoing and the incoming Chief of the Defence Staff—and it is shared by the permanent secretary. We are committed to leading defence through a period of rigorous reflection, analysis and improvement, and I am determined to make that improvement happen. I need, and the House would want me, to be absolutely sure that when our servicemen and women are deployed in future—and, inevitably, that is when, not if—nobody will be able to point to Sir John's report and justifiably accuse us of repeating the same mistakes. I want to give the House an assurance that Sir John's report will not be the last word.

In conclusion, our strategic defence and security review reminds us that we are living in an ever more dangerous world. Despite the report and the Iraq campaign, we must still be ready to act, as we have shown in our participation in the international coalition campaign against Daesh in Iraq and Syria today. We must remain as committed as ever to protecting our people and standing up to any kind of terrorism or aggression that seeks to destroy our very way of life. Sir John and his team, I repeat, have done us all a great service. Their work will enable us to learn the vital lessons from those operations in Iraq and ensure that we are not condemned to make the same mistakes in future.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.

That this House has considered the Report of the Iraq Inquiry.
Detention under Mental Health Act

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[George Hollingbery.]}

4.40 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): As an ethnic minority immigrant to this country, I am intrigued by the way the House works. We have had two days of a deeply serious international debate, and now an ethnic minority immigrant has an opportunity to put a point on a small but important issue that is almost local by comparison. I am referring to the possibility of a small change in the Mental Health Act 1983 to enable our policemen and women to act somewhat more promptly in the care of any person they find to be in need of mental health assessment and immediate care.

I raised this issue in a ten-minute rule Bill in 2014. I did not proceed, as I was informed that there was an ongoing review. That review has come and gone, and I have read it, but this small point was not referred to in it. However, there will possibly be a negative change—from my point of view—in the Policing and Crime Bill as it progresses through the other place.

I was initially prompted to seek changes having seen the need for them first hand. I was on a police parliamentary scheme in 2014, as part of which I went round Wandsworth on foot or by car. I joined two young uniformed police officers in their response car. The first call was a dash to a flat on the 14th floor of a council residential tower block. The mother of the household nervously let the officers in to see her daughter—aged 22—who was standing on the window ledge and threatening to jump.

It was quickly established that the daughter had a short history of suicide attempts. With the back-up of two plainclothes officers, and with great expertise, the young woman was persuaded to come down. A young female officer sat on the bed beside her, and they calmly discussed the problem. The police officer suggested the young woman might want to go to a place of safety for psychiatric and medical help. That was refused, and when the woman was pressed a little further, it was followed by agitation and threats to jump out of the window.

Meanwhile, police officers outside the flat had contacted the psychiatric unit at St George’s hospital for assistance. After a couple of hours, an individual from the hospital arrived with an ambulance and crew. There was further alarm and rejection, and a struggle ensued, but in due course this sad lady was transported to the hospital as a designated place of safety.

The whole pantomime had occupied five police officers and three NHS staff, and it had taken about three to four hours to sort out. It was obvious from the beginning that the police themselves could have taken care of the young lady very quickly, therefore reducing the police and NHS manpower hours needed and the risk of the young lady leaping out of the window.

I have a second personal case, which involves a Mole Valley resident. A lady in a block of flats has been threatening neighbours with bizarre and often aggressive behaviour to such a degree that some other residents actually fear for their lives, let alone obtain any peace at any hour of the day. Contact between the mental health team and the police has not coincided until very recently. I asked the police officer in charge about section 136. Predictably, I was told the lady’s home was a private place, so no police action was legally possible. From discussions with Met police officers, I have found that that situation is far from unusual.

A more tragic case was the death of Martin Middleton in 2010. He was taken to a Leeds police station by officers who had visited him in his home and noted his serious preparations for committing suicide. The police officers believed they had arrested Mr Middleton under section 136. When they arrived at the police station, the custody sergeant refused to detain Mr Middleton, as the arrest had taken place in his private residence. The police officers therefore had to take him to what they hoped was some form of safety—a relative’s home. Sadly, later that day or the following day, he hanged himself.

At the inquest, the coroner had no hesitation in agreeing with Professor Keith Rix, who was called to give expert evidence, that Mr Middleton fell into a category of mentally disordered persons for whom there is no appropriate provision under the Act. Subsequent to raising this issue, I have heard from many front-line police officers and again from Professor Keith Rix, who is an academic psychiatrist and an expert in this area. I still have no doubt that the Act needs amending fully to protect the police and, of course, those suffering a mental illness crisis.

I am reliably informed that in the Republic of Ireland, the Garda Siochana have a clear operational advantage in that, under section 12 of Ireland’s Mental Health Act 2001, where there is “a serious likelihood of the person causing immediate and serious harm to himself or herself or to other persons”, a garda can “enter…any dwelling or other premises or any place if he or she has reasonable grounds for believing that the person is to be found there.”

There are instances recorded in England where the police have had to act outside the boundaries of the law out of concern for the safety of the individual. There are also recognised incidences of the desperate police persuading the person out of their home, and therefore into a public place, to effect an arrest under section 136 and take the person for proper and appropriate care, thus preventing a suicide. Over the 10 years between 1997-98 and 2007-08, admissions to hospital as a place of safety increased from 2,237 to 7,035. The Minister is noted for his quick arithmetic, and he will recognise that that is a threefold increase.

It was calculated that 17,417 people were detained under section 136 in 2005-06. By 2011-12, the overall number of incidences of its use was recorded as 23,500. As I have indicated, although the powers under section 136 are limited to persons who are found by the police in a public place, there is evidence that the powers are sometimes used to remove an affected person from their home. In fact, one London-based social services authority’s audited figures indicated that some 30% of section 136 arrests were recorded as having been made at or just outside the detainee’s home. In other words, in desperation, the police have had to manoeuvre the individual outside their private residence. This is an indication of the desperation of the police to obtain care for disturbed individuals, and hence it supports my desire for a change in the legislation.
Put bluntly, on a strict interpretation of section 136, the admission to hospital of hundreds, if not thousands, of potential suicides is delayed or denied, thus risking their suicide or self-harm, merely because the police, who sometimes have to just observe the situation, cannot act because it is happening in the person’s home or someone else’s home. In many instances, as I found in Wandsworth, the police have to spend considerable time waiting until they can obtain a medical practitioner or a health official to give them the nod to transport the patient to care.

One argument against the amendment that I am suggesting is that the police already have sufficient powers. It is quite clear, from my own observation, that that is basically incorrect. The second argument is that it would extend the right of the police to enter people’s private properties. Clearly, in those circumstances, that is appropriate because somebody is in need of mental health care, and that is the whole point of the change I am seeking. It is already possible for the police to enter an individual’s private home to investigate a possible breach of the peace, assuming that the police would be utilising that eventuality to enter the property. Often, they have to help someone who is clearly suffering mental disorder. In many cases, other residents in the property can allow the police in, but having done so, as in the first case I cited, they are then still unable to act.

In my belief, and in my experience, the police are acting only in the very best interests of the individuals concerned and of the safety of the public, and we should give them the legal mechanism to do so. Doing nothing is not an option. I suggest that a simple solution would be to amend section 136 by simply removing the words “in a place to which the public have access”.

I am hopeful of a positive answer from the Minister; I know that he is extremely flexible. I would be happy to work with him to seek a ten-minute rule Bill, or take a different direction through a tiny change to the Policing and Crime Bill in another place. If he has a problem with my suggestion, I would be grateful if he met me and Professor Rix to discuss a solution to help the police to save lives and injuries, and not, as the Department appear to be doing, produce exactly the opposite effect.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of State for Policing, Crime, Criminal Justice and Victims, at the Home Office and at the Ministry of Justice, to reply to the debate.

4.49 pm

The Minister for Policing, Fire, Criminal Justice and Victims (Mike Penning): Far be it for me to ever contradict you, Mr Speaker, but I lost crime some time ago and now have fire. The title you gave me is correct, except that I now have no crime, but lots of fire.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) that it is a pleasure to respond to this debate. We have met to discuss his concerns before. I have received delegations on the subject and it was discussed extensively during the Committee stage of the Policing and Crime Bill.

To be fair, my hon. Friend does highlight an issue, and I am not going to run away from that. He is absolutely right to say that there are concerns about extending powers into a place of safety that is deemed to be someone’s abode. I have been on patrol with the police when they have encountered very similar situations to the first case that he mentioned. I have also heard people say, long before I got this position, “If only we could get this person out of their home, we could help them under the existing legislation.”

I am sure that all custody sergeants, who do a fantastic job, are as diligent as the one who my hon. Friend has met. I once heard a custody sergeant say that section 136 would not be appropriate when a person was in a public place. I do not think that that is right, either, but police officers are not mental health experts. One of the problems with section 136 is that it is specifically designed as a last resort when all other measures to help an individual have been exhausted. I will touch on other matters relating to the expertise that police officers do not always have, including the street triage initiative and resources for custody suites, and, importantly, the situation out with officers.

Before we consider changing section 136, we need to ask whether it is being used correctly. We are concerned about the number of section 136 orders that are being used, and the data that I asked for show that forces in some parts of the country almost never use section 136, while others use it extensively.

Sir Paul Beresford: It would be interesting to compare and contrast those statistics with the suicide statistics. By law, anyone arrested under section 136 must be seen within 72 hours by a psychiatrist or a medical practitioner with psychiatric training, which represents an enormous safeguard.

Mike Penning: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We will break down the analysis for information not just on suicides, but on criminal assaults, which are often carried out on loved ones. When I was out on patrol with the Metropolitan police in Camden, we went to what the neighbours described as a “domestic situation”: in other words, someone had allegedly been assaulted. When we arrived at and eventually got into the flat, the one thing that the person who had been assaulted desperately did not want was for their loved one to be arrested and taken to a prison cell, because they were ill. They were ill in a similar way to someone who had broken their leg or who had a medical illness. They were ill and they needed to go to a suitable place of safety.

All too often over the years, that person would have been arrested and ended up in a police cell. If they were not subject to section 136, they would not necessarily have the safeguard of being seen by a medical or psychiatric specialist. That is one of the reasons why the amount of time that someone with a mental illness can be kept in a police cell is massively restricted by legislation.

I would argue that this is a matter not just for the police, but for social services and the NHS in particular. It is not for a police officer to diagnose instantly whether someone having a mental health episode is drunk, has taken illegal drugs, or has had their medication go wrong. I may not be the Minister with responsibility for the police as the reshuffle goes on, but at the moment they are my police officers in England and Wales, and very often they have to make split-second decisions. However, I am desperate to make sure that they are not put in the difficult position of being the first port of call rather than being, as they should be, the last resort for those in desperate need.
When I was fireman, I regularly attended incidents with the local police force. At about a quarter to five on a Friday, social services would phone the police and fire stations to say that they were going home for the weekend, but they had not seen Mary or Jonny—vulnerable people—during the week, so could we make sure that they were okay. Sometimes we had to break into the premises. I argued then and I argue now that that is not the role of the emergency services, and it is certainly not the role of the police. However, that has become the norm in all our constituencies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley will be pleased to know that an inter-ministerial group is looking at this. When I was disabilities Minister, I sat on the group and argued my point about not just people with mental illnesses, but people with learning difficulties. The two are often confused in this area, because people with learning difficulties can also become very confused as we desperately try to look after them.

If someone has a mental illness, the place of safety that we take them to is not a police cell. We do exactly what it says on the tin and take them to a place of safety, which means a medical setting provided by the NHS or social services.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I support my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) in everything that he is trying to do. Does the Minister agree that the time limit in the safeguards in section 136, which require an examination by a registered medical practitioner or an interview by an approved medical health professional within 72 hours, could be reduced to perhaps 12 hours? That would mean that the person in question would get more immediate help.

Mike Penning: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is exactly what will happen under the Policing and Crime Bill. The police will not be able to hold a person in a police cell for the length of time that they previously could while waiting for that medical examination to take place. However, to be honest, I think we can all agree that 12 hours is too long. Would we find it acceptable if someone with a broken leg had to wait in A&E for 72 hours? My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley is a qualified dentist. Would someone wait 72 hours if they had a huge abscess in their mouth that needed urgent treatment? Why is mental health treated so differently from other illnesses? That is something that my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) has been working on extensively, although sadly he has decided to return to the Back Benches. When the coalition was in power, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) accepted that the NHS was letting these people down, and that the men and women in our police forces were having to pick up the mess by dealing with those in desperate situations. That really is not the role of a police force.

Unless the Government come together to deal with this, my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley is right to be concerned about sections 136 and 135. I hope that he will take up my offer of our working together. I am sorry that I did not manage to be with him to meet the professor, although we did bump into him. If the concerns cannot be dealt with in the way that my officials and the three Departments that handle this suggest that they can, we will absolutely need to amend section 136, but let us first try to get to the right place. This will sound critical of other Departments, but I do not want the police to be seen, yet again, to be picking up something that another Department needs to address. That is what has happened over the years.

When I have said that we should restrict the length of time for which these very vulnerable people can be held in a police cell, one argument that has been put to me is: where will they go? How many specialist A&E facilities and places of safety are there, besides the cells in the local prison? The answer is that provision has to be made to ensure that the cells are not the first port of call.

5 pm  
**Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).**

**Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(George Hollingbery.)**

Mike Penning: To conclude, it is absolutely right that this issue has been brought to the House, although I am aware of it. I was aware of it before I took on my portfolio and, to be fair, even before I came into the House, because my mother was a mental health nurse for more than 40 years. We are in a much better position today than we have been in the past, and we have a better understanding of mental health and learning difficulties.—[Interruption.] The phone in my pocket is buzzing; it may well be someone trying to get hold of me urgently.

It is important that we work together. I give my hon. Friend a commitment that if we cannot get this right using the measures that we are working on, an amendment to section 136 might be exactly what we need.

**Question put and agreed to.**

5.1 pm  
**House adjourned.**
House of Commons

Monday 18 July 2016

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure that the whole House will join me in expressing sympathy and solidarity with the French people following Thursday’s horrific events in Nice. A short silence was held at 11 o’clock across the parliamentary estate to remember those involved. I have written to my counterpart, Claude Bartolone, this morning expressing condolences. I should also like to inform the House that I have received a letter from the President of the Chamber of Deputies of Italy telling me that her Chamber has established a cross-party committee on intolerance, xenophobia, racism and hate crime and has decided to name it the Cox Committee after our colleague, Jo Cox. In the President’s words: “Through this act, we will contribute to keeping the memory of Jo Cox, and of what she stood for, alive”.

Oral Answers to Questions

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Business Rates

1. Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): What progress his Department has made on enabling local authorities to retain 100% of business rates.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I should like to associate myself with your comments about the tragedy in Nice, Mr Speaker. I am sure that the thoughts and prayers of the whole House are with the victims and their families and friends. I also warmly welcome the establishment of the Cox Committee.

The full retention of business rates is a reform that councils have long campaigned for, and it will shape the role and purpose of local government for many decades to come. To deliver this commitment, we have already published an open consultation inviting councils, businesses and local people to have their say on how the system should operate.

Lucy Allan: I congratulate the Minister on his new appointment and I really look forward to working with him. Businesses want to move to Telford all the time, and for that reason the move to 100% business rate retention will mean welcome extra revenue for our council. Are there any plans to top-slice business rate income from councils with higher levels of business rate income to subsidise those with lower levels?

Sajid Javid: We want councils to take bold decisions and to use the benefits of this measure to boost local growth. Some redistribution will be necessary among authorities to ensure that no council loses out if it collects lower business rates, but I can reassure my hon. Friend—who already does a lot to boost business in her local area—that where that is done, it will keep the extra revenue.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): For business rates to keep flowing, we need our top companies to keep prospering. The Secretary of State might be aware that ARM Technology, a major Cambridge company, has today been acquired by a major Japanese company. What conversations has he had with the former Business Secretary on ensuring that guarantees are maintained and that the jobs involved are retained in the UK?

Mr Speaker: Very tenuous—ingenious, but tenuous.

Sajid Javid: I warmly welcome investment in our local communities—including in Cambridgeshire—wherever it comes from. I have not had a conversation with the Business Secretary, given that this news was announced only recently, but I know that the Chancellor has already issued a statement.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): At present, the way in which business rates work imposes rates on empty properties. This is holding back many urban regeneration schemes. Will the new Secretary of State therefore reform the way in which those rules work before the whole scheme is transferred to local authorities? That would make a crucial difference to the modernisation of our housing estates in particular.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and I know that he speaks from experience as a former housing Minister. I will certainly take a fresh look at that.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his new post. May I politely say to him that not every area has the same ability to raise income from business rates or council tax, and it is often the poorest areas that are disadvantaged as a result of lower income generation from both sources? Will he look at the example of Tameside Metropolitan Borough, which would need an additional 16 Ikea stores just to break even on its business rate retention? Will he ensure that, when he looks at redistribution, he ends up with a fair settlement for areas such as Tameside?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. The needs of each area are different, which is why at the same time as launching the consultation we launched a fair funding review to look at the issues that the hon. Gentleman raises.

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): May I also associate myself and Labour Front Benchers with your remarks about the atrocity in Nice, Mr Speaker?

I welcome the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and his team to their new positions—it is an important brief.
I point out to the Secretary of State that his Government have broken the post-war cross-party consensus on the equalisation of resource allocation. To echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), does the Secretary of State realise that the most deprived communities with the greatest needs often have the lowest tax bases and the least ability to raise their own business rates?

Sajid Javid: I warmly welcome the hon. Gentleman’s words. As I have said, as we approach the policy of 100% business rates retention, there will of course be some redistribution to ensure that no council loses out if it has a low business rate funding base. The fair funding review will look at just that—fair funding—to ensure that every local area gets the funding it deserves.

Coastal Regeneration

2. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to regenerate the Great British coast.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The Government recognise that coastal communities face particular challenges but have huge economic potential. We have already invested £120 million in 211 coastal communities fund projects and have provided £10,000 to each of the 118 coastal community teams.

Peter Aldous: I welcome the Secretary of State to his place. While a great deal is taking place to regenerate coastal towns such as Lowestoft, there is a concern, as highlighted by the British Hospitality Association last week, that such initiatives are not co-ordinated. In the first full week of the new Government, I urge the Secretary of State to appoint a Minister to work across Departments to address that concern.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend works hard on his constituents’ behalf and has already helped to secure almost £2 million from the coastal communities fund for his area, but he makes an excellent point about cross-Government co-operation. I am pleased to announce that my hon. Friend the Member for Brig and Goole (Andrew Percy) is the Minister who will take responsibility for this area, so we can all be assured that it is in very safe hands. I also want to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) for all his excellent work.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My constituency has many coastal destinations that would be attractive to anyone—not just those in my area. The Secretary of State will be aware of the cross-party, cross-regional group within Westminster that has been meeting regularly over the past few months. What discussions has he had with the Northern Ireland Assembly and with other regions to ensure that we can do this together?

Sajid Javid: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, at this point I have not had any discussions with my colleagues in Northern Ireland, but I can reassure him that they will be a priority, because it is good to talk and to co-ordinate even where policies are devolved.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Commuters returning home to the glories of Milton Keynes can do so in just over 30 minutes. Travelling the same distance to Bexhill takes almost 2 hours. Is the Secretary of State willing to work with me and my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), to try to bring High Speed 1 trains down from Ashford to Hastings and Bexhill?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I am more than happy to listen to his case and to work with the Secretary of State for Transport, because the issue will involve both Departments.

Homelessness

3. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of introducing legislative proposals to extend local authorities’ duty of care in homelessness cases.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): We are committed to putting prevention at the heart of our approach to homelessness. We have committed £315 million to local authority homelessness prevention funding and will work with local authorities, charities and Departments to consider further reforms, including legislation.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the Minister for that reply, but Bristol City Council’s budget for preventing homelessness was cut by 20% between 2011 and 2015. What extra funding will the Government make available to local authorities such as Bristol, which has experienced a significant recent rise in homelessness, to cope with the scale of the problem—particularly if their duty of care is extended under the metro mayor model?

Mr Jones: Homelessness acceptances remain less than half what they were under the peak of the Labour Government in 2003-04. That said, one person without a home is one too many. Last year, we provided Bristol with £1 million of homelessness prevention funding, which will be maintained each year across this Parliament. I know that Bristol is starting to do some innovative things in homelessness prevention, and I would very much like to meet the Mayor of Bristol to discuss both the work that is being done on rough sleeping and the task and finish group, which I know has been set up.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Given the provisions of the Self-Build and Custom Housebuilding Act 2015, a piece of legislation for which I have a certain affection, will the Secretary of State look at the work of the Community Self-Build Agency, which is allowing vulnerable groups, such as the unemployed, the disabled and others, including homeless veterans, to obtain a place of their own and to stop being homeless?

Mr Jones: I had great enjoyment on the Housing and Planning Bill Committee, where my hon. Friend made considerable representation on behalf of people involved in self-build. It is certainly an important area, and one in which the new Minister for Housing and Planning,
my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell), is interested, and he would certainly be keen to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that further.

Mr Speaker: We are all very glad that the Minister enjoyed himself so much.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Homelessness in Scotland has fallen since the abolition of priority need in homelessness legislation. Given the rise in homelessness in England, might the Minister consider that?

Mr Jones: We are certainly keen to listen to what is going on in other parts of the Union, but we do need to acknowledge that the housing market in Scotland is different from that in England, and particularly from that in London. I am always keen to hear what we are doing in other parts of the UK so that we can improve the way in which we deal with homelessness prevention.

Alison Thewliss: I thank the Minister for his answer. Part of the difference in Scotland is that we abolished the right to buy, thereby allowing housing stock to be maintained. Will he also look at Wales, which has seen a reduction in homelessness, too? Its interesting practice of early intervention is helping to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place.

Mr Jones: We are certainly looking at what has happened in Wales and at the way in which the legislation has been changed. It is extremely important that we assess the effectiveness of those changes. Those changes have only just been introduced, and we are looking carefully at their impact, but we need to look at not just one or two quarters of figures but a longer term picture to ensure that the changes in Wales would correlate to and work with the English system. I hear what the hon. Lady says on the right to buy, but people should have the opportunity to own their own home, and this Government are absolutely committed to that.

COUNCIL SERVICES

4. Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of councils in delivering front-line services while limiting council tax levels.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): We are putting more power in the hands of councils—through devolution deals and the retention of 100% of business rates—to ensure that councils can save money and maintain front-line services.

Mims Davies: I thank the Minister for his response. Proper local plans for good front-line planning departments are labour intensive and require meticulous work by local authority officers. Does the Minister agree that creating a poor plan, which then fails due to a lack of evidence, is an example of the shocking waste of hard-earned council taxpayers’ money?

Sajid Javid: I find myself agreeing with my hon. Friend. Planning should be at the heart of what local councils do. Local councils should be setting a vision for the area, and using that as a framework for development. It should be a top priority for all councils. Where it does not happen, we should expect them to resource it properly.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): How on earth can local authorities manage to run their affairs in the way they used to, when this Government have cut £157 million from Derbyshire County Council? The same has applied to Labour-controlled Bolsover in a proportionate way. This Minister has a cheek to be talking about local government being able to spend money properly when his Government have been taking its money away.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman should know that funding is broadly flat in cash terms. More importantly, it is perfectly possible to find savings—local councils spend £1 in every £4 of public money—and at the same time to maintain and enhance local services.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): To deliver greater devolution responsibility for local authorities, what more can be done to attract the very best councillors, particularly those with busy and successful careers?

Sajid Javid: I know that many colleagues in the House have considerable experience in this area, and it is something that I shall be looking at, because I have found that in local authorities across the country that I have visited, there is a very mixed level of ability, let us say, and more needs to be done.

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): I hope the Secretary of State is aware of a recent report by the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, which found that 93% of councils implemented the social care precept, but that raised only £380 million. Some £1.1 billion is needed to maintain social care at its current level. Social care is facing a perfect storm—there is growing demand from an ageing population, costs are rising, and budgets are being squeezed by central Government cuts—so what action is the Minister going to take to address the chronic underfunding of our social care?

Sajid Javid: It is a huge priority for this Government to make sure that adult social care is funded adequately. I do not accept that it is underfunded. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the precept. By the end of this Parliament it will raise an additional £2 billion a year. On top of that, the Government asked local councils how much they thought they would need by the end of this Parliament for adult social care. The number that came back was £2.9 billion; they got £3.5 billion.

SOCIAL HOUSING

5. Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the level of funding available for social housing.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): Housing is a devolved matter. In England we have committed £8 billion to deliver 400,000 much-needed affordable homes—the largest affordable housing programme for nearly 40 years. The result of the EU referendum does not change that commitment.
Kirsten Oswald: The UK has had £43 billion of European Investment Bank loans over the past eight years, whereas non-EU countries such as Norway or Switzerland have had only £1 billion. Can the Minister provide any detail on his contingency plan for the funding of social housing and infrastructure projects when that EU finding inevitably dries up?

Gavin Barwell: That obviously makes some contribution towards our delivery of affordable housing but, as I said, the Government have committed £8 billion. That will deliver starter homes, shared ownership homes and more affordable and intermediate rent housing. This is the largest programme that we have seen in more than 40 years and it will make a big contribution to tackling the housing issues that we see in our country.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his new post, and I welcome the Government focus on affordable homes to buy through the starter homes programme, but we also need affordable homes to rent. Does the Minister agree that as we have made the decision to leave the EU, now is the right time to consider more investment in social rented homes to meet local needs and local affordability?

Gavin Barwell: My hon. Friend is right to say that we need a mix of tenures—a mix of offers. That is what the programme provides. He tempts me into decisions that will ultimately be for the Government and for the Chancellor at the next Budget, but he makes a powerful case for further investment in affordable housing.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his new role and look forward to seeing him and the Secretary of State at the Select Committee before long. Are the Government still committed to building a million homes in this Parliament? Given that leaving the EU could have a depressing effect on the building a million homes in this Parliament? Given that leaving the EU could have a depressing effect on the building of housing, will the Minister commit to the large programme that we have seen in more than 40 years and will it make a big contribution to tackling the housing issues that we see in our country?

Kevin Hollinrake: The simple answer to the Select Committee Chairman’s first question is yes, we are still committed to building a million homes in this Parliament. Given that leaving the EU could have a depressing effect on the building of housing, will the Minister commit to the large programme that we have seen in more than 40 years and will it make a big contribution to tackling the housing issues that we see in our country?

Gavin Barwell: The simple answer to the Select Committee Chairman’s first question is yes, we are still committed to building a million homes in this Parliament. Across this House, I hope, there is a consensus that we need to increase the level of house building. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), we are looking at a mixed programme, including investment in affordable and intermediate rent, as well as shared ownership and helping people to own their own homes. I point the hon. Gentleman to the research that shows that 86% of our constituents want to own their own home. One of the critical things that we should all be trying to do is help people enjoy the opportunity that nearly all of us as Members of Parliament enjoy.

High Street Retailers

6. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support high street retailers.

8. Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support high street retailers.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): This Government are supporting our high streets to thrive. We have introduced the biggest-ever cut in business rates, worth £6.7 billion, launched the high street pledge and the digital high street pilots, and introduced a fairer parking regime and sensible planning changes, and we are celebrating our high streets through the hugely successful annual Great British High Street competition.

Luke Hall: Chipping Sodbury has entered the Great British High Street competition. It has been the home of markets since the middle ages. It hosts mock fairs, Victorian evenings and the annual Sheep Search classic car runs. It is home to the Fabulous Baker Brothers. It has seven pubs on the high street alone. Will the Minister therefore welcome Chipping Sodbury’s application and perhaps visit one of the most beautiful high streets in the United Kingdom?

Mr Jones: I am absolutely delighted to hear that Chipping Sodbury has entered the competition; it sounds as though it will put in a very competitive bid. The competition has been a wonderful initiative, which has shone a light on high streets around the country, where local people are working hard to make sure their high street remains at the heart of their local community. Last year we received nearly 200,000 votes from members of the public for the finalist, showing how much high streets mean to local people. I wish Chipping Sodbury well and hope to visit it, but I would also encourage other towns in my hon. Friend’s constituency to enter, such as Thornbury, where my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State’s dad used to run a ladies’ fashion shop.

Mr Speaker: Well, it is always useful to have a bit of information.

Andrew Bingham: The high streets in my constituency—in places such as Buxton and Glossop—are very much the hub of the town, so anything my hon. Friend can do to ensure we do not sit on our laurels and think, “We’ve done it” would be welcome. Will he tell me that we will continue to look to help the high street? As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will confirm following his visit to Glossop last year, it has a vibrant, happening high street that is crucial to the community.

Mr Jones: The Government are absolutely taking action to protect our much-loved high streets. We have introduced the biggest-ever cut in business rates, which will mean that 600,000 of the smallest businesses will not have to pay business rates again. Just last week, I also announced the high street pledge, under which 40 of our country’s largest multiple retailers have signed up to local managers taking part in local initiatives to support the high street. I know my hon. Friend’s area and towns such as Glossop, and they are fantastic places for people to live, work, shop and socialise. I would encourage him to encourage his local areas to put some of those towns forward for the Great British High Street competition 2016.
Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): West Ealing used to boast high street names, but now it is all bookies, charity shops, fried chicken chains and, most prominently, BrightHouse, which is preying on the vulnerable, with white goods at sky-high annual percentage rates and repossession for defaulters. If the Government really want to put the “local” back into local business, will the Minister tell us when he will end the rip-off of BrightHouse?

Mr Jones: I am not going to bash businesses that create jobs and growth for our economy, but what I would say to the hon. Lady is that the Great British High Street competition identified some excellent practice, where things were going well and people were working extremely hard, and we have a good practice guide. I suggest that she pop down to Pitshanger Lane in Ealing, which has a fantastic high street and which is the proud recipient of the Great British High Street competition award 2015.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that our high streets are in decline? We are losing small retail shops at the rate of 16 a day. We are seeing a decline in retail goods being bought on our high streets. He announced a plethora of things this morning, which he has repeated now, and he has said that that will, hopefully, turn things around. How will we measure the success of what he has announced in turning this decline around?

Mr Jones: We have to realise that there is a significant structural shift taking place in retailing, with many people now choosing to buy their goods online and in out-of-town shopping centres, rather than on the high street. We need to make sure, though, that the high street is fit for the 21st century. The Future High Streets Forum, which I jointly chair, is looking at how we restructure our high streets to bring in new investment, and particularly at how we bring more starter homes into our town centres so that we can start to really rejuvenate and regenerate places that offer something that out-of-town shopping and shopping on the internet just cannot compete with.

Rough Sleeping/Homelessness

7. Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support homeless people. [905890]

Mr Jones: [905890] Supporting homeless people will require real resources given to real people, such as the £115 million promised to the homeless charity Caritas Anchor House. May I encourage the Minister—and, indeed, the Secretary of State—to avoid, as he comes into his new responsibilities, just changing the deckchairs in different parts of Whitehall? In this context, will he please ditch his policy, or that of his predecessor, to impose an elected mayor on Lincolnshire?

Mr Jones: I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has heard my hon. Friend’s question about the potential, or not, elected mayor in Lincolnshire. With regard to homelessness, it is always good to hear about how charities such as the one that he mentioned are using innovative ways to tackle old problems. Providing support to help people to recover from homelessness is extremely important. It is absolutely key that we help people in that position to start to rebuild their lives. That is why we are investing £20 million in tackling rough sleeping and £100 million in move-on accommodation from hostels and refuges.

Stephen Metcalfe: Is my hon. Friend generally supportive of the No Second Night Out service, and how does he intend to ensure that it is available in all local authority areas?

Mr Jones: We are absolutely supportive of the approach taken by No Second Night Out, which my Department rolled out nationally in the previous Parliament. I absolutely want to build on the success of this initiative. Our new £10 million rough sleeping fund will scale up ways in which we can prevent and reduce rough sleeping. It will also go further, building on the successful approaches of No Second Night Out—and indeed “no first night out”, because it is best if we can prevent people from being on the streets at all. Details of this programme and the bidding round will be announced shortly.

Will Quince: Beacon House is a wonderful charity supporting the homeless in Colchester. What further support can the Minister give to local charities like Beacon House up and down this country in their work to tackle homelessness?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Charities play an extremely valuable part in the fight against homelessness. I know that he has taken part in a sleep-out to raise money for Beacon House, which this Department has also supported financially. I chair a round table with chief executives of a number of these vital homelessness charities to discuss what more can be done. The information that we have gathered at these meetings feeds directly into the ministerial working group, which I also chair.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is a fair-minded chap, and he will know that homelessness is a complex problem. First, as he will admit, there is a link between the lack of affordable housing—both rented and to buy—in our major cities. In addition, many of those we see on the streets of London and in Yorkshire are people on the mental health spectrum who need assistance and help, and cannot get it.
Mr Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes extremely fair points. That is why we are investing £1.6 billion over this Parliament to deliver an additional 100,000 homes for affordable rent. His point about mental health is extremely well made. I chair a ministerial working group and am working with other Departments, and Ministers in other Departments, to ensure that the links between things such as mental health issues and drink and drug dependency are dealt with across Government, because this is not just a housing issue.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): According to the Combined Homelessness And Information Network database, 8,096 people slept rough at some point in London during 2015-16—a 7% increase on the previous year. With an ever-growing housing crisis in this city, when are the Government going to take action and learn lessons from the different approaches taken by the devolved nations?

Mr Jones: As I said in my answer to the previous question, this is not just a housing issue and therefore we are working across Government to try to resolve it. We are putting a significant amount of money—£139 million—into this important issue during this spending review period. That includes £10 million to scale up initiatives to prevent and reduce rough sleeping, which is extremely important, and £10 million for an upgraded social impact bond, which had a significant amount of success during the last Parliament.

20. [905903] Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Following the examination by the Communities and Local Government Committee, of which I am a member, of homelessness policy, and the private Member’s Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), will the Minister look into an approach whereby local authorities in England are specifically measured on their responsibility for homelessness?

Mr Jones: We are aware that the Select Committee is due to publish its report shortly. Although we have not yet had sight of the report, I am keen to see the Committee’s recommendations and how it can help shape our programme of work. We want to ensure that local authorities have the tools that they need to put prevention absolutely at the heart of tackling homelessness. Good data and measurement are vital for that prevention, and that is why we are currently looking at how the data are collected and used to support prevention, so that we can find those at risk of becoming homeless far earlier than we do at present.

House Building

9. Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the outcome of the EU referendum on house building.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): The need for new homes continues, as does our commitment to delivering 1 million of them by 2020. We are keeping markets under review, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I will meet the major house builders this week.

Mr Hanson: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. Uncertainty breeds uncertainty, and the problems faced before and after the referendum have resulted in the market value of many building companies falling by as much as 40% because of uncertainty about the future. I welcome the meeting that he is going to have this week with building companies. Will he agree to report back early to this House on what steps we can take to secure confidence on new build in the housing market?

Gavin Barwell: I am certainly happy to undertake to do that. I have two points to make. First, the right hon. Gentleman will have seen the steps that the Bank of England has taken to reassure markets following the referendum. Secondly, I draw his attention to a statement by Peter Andrew, the deputy chairman of the Home Builders Federation, who said on 5 July:

“House builders remain confident in the underlying level of demand for housing and will continue to deliver the homes the country needs.”

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Given the demand-and-supply equation for housing in this country, the Minister is correct to assume that there will still be strong growth in housing. Does he agree that it is very important that neighbourhood plans play their part in future planning policy and that they should, therefore, be strengthened? Would he like to take this opportunity to confirm that he will continue to support the strengthening of those plans in the forthcoming Bill?

Gavin Barwell: I am very happy to reiterate my support for that. It is worth noting that early figures show that neighbourhood plans provide about 10% more homes than local plans, so there is real evidence that giving communities a real say in the future of how their areas develop leads to more homes being developed, and we will legislate during this Session.

14. [905897] John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): On house building, new research from the House of Commons Library shows that, in the six years under last week’s Prime Minister, fewer new homes were built in this country than under any Prime Minister since the 1920s, including 14% fewer than under Gordon Brown, despite the downturn; 21% fewer than under Tony Blair; and 35% fewer than under Margaret Thatcher. The new Housing Minister and Secretary of State are not responsible for their predecessors’ mistakes, but they are responsible for what happens now, particularly in the light of the EU referendum. After six years of failure on housing under Conservative Ministers, what changes can we now expect to see?

Gavin Barwell: The right hon. Gentleman was one of my predecessors, and under him new house building was at the lowest level since the 1920s. Obviously, we had to recover from that position. Net new dwellings last year were at the same level as the average over the whole period of the Labour Government. I point the right hon. Gentleman to one statistic: in the year to March 2016, 265,000 homes were given planning permission, which is the highest figure on record.
Business Rates

10. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What steps the Government plan to take to ensure that the devolution of business rates does not adversely affect deprived areas.

Sajid Javid: The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): By the end of this Parliament, local government will retain 100% of taxes raised locally. There will be redistribution between councils, so that areas do not lose out on funding where they collect less in taxes.

Jeff Smith: I agree with the Secretary of State that, as he said earlier, no council should lose out, so there will need to be some system of top-ups and tariffs. We also need to use the opportunity to incentivise areas to promote growth. How will the Government ensure that this does not become just an administrative exercise that leads to another complicated local government funding formula by another name?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman’s constituency has already seen a 44% fall in the claimant count since 2010, and this is another way to try to boost local growth by having control over local taxes. He makes the important point that we should make sure that no council loses out, and that is why there will be this redistribution, but at the same time there will be more ways to promote local growth.

Combined Authorities

11. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage devolution of powers to combined authorities; and if he will make a statement.

Sajid Javid: Our Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 is delivering on our manifesto commitment to devolve powers and budgets to boost local growth in England. Ten devolution deals have been agreed already in local areas, covering some £7 billion of funds and some 16 million people in England.

Michael Fabricant: A few days before the referendum, we heard that 5,000 jobs would be lost from HSBC. Surprisingly, only three days ago Mr Nigel Hinshelwood, who is the chief executive of HSBC, announced 1,200 new jobs and said that no jobs would be lost because of the supreme efficiency of the west midlands area. What further developments are happening with regard to the west midlands combined authority, which has the potential to promote even more employment during Brexit?

Sajid Javid: I understand the vital importance of the west midlands and the financial sector in boosting growth in that area as a fellow west midlands MP. My hon. Friend will know that very recently, in my former role, I went there to open the midlands financial centre of excellence, which will further help to develop jobs in that area. The west midlands combined authority that he asks about is now formally constituted; that happened last month. It looks set to have its first set of elections in May next year.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Over the next five years alone, the north-east was due to receive £726 million in EU funding, but the north-east devolution deal promises only £30 million a year for 30 years. Despite what the Secretary of State said just now, many devolution deals were already in a state of collapse before the EU referendum. With such high levels of uncertainty because of Brexit, is it not time he revisited all the devolution deals?

Sajid Javid: There is no need to reconsider any of the deals. These are good deals that have been reached by local leaders and central Government, and they will all, in turn, help to boost local growth. The hon. Lady mentions EU grants. As my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning has mentioned, it is important that we bring certainty, and that is what we will be working to do.

19. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): One of the devolution deals that my right hon. Friend referred to a moment ago is the greater Lincolnshire deal, which is under consultation. May I urge my right hon. Friend, despite the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), to push ahead with that deal with, as the two councils in my constituency want, an elected mayor as part of it?

Sajid Javid: As my hon. Friend knows, it is not right for central Government to impose deals on any area. We certainly will not be doing that. These are deals because they require an agreement to be reached, but we will certainly be working with all areas that are interested, including Lincolnshire, to see what we can do.

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware of the statement by the Local Government Association following the decision to leave the European Union. EU laws and regulations impact on many council services including waste, employment, health and safety, consumer protection, trading and environmental standards. My question on devolution is this: what steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that local government is consulted and represented when negotiations over the UK’s exit from the EU commence, and that powers from Brussels are devolved to a local level, not centralised in Whitehall?

Sajid Javid: It is very important that local government, whether through the LGA or otherwise, has a say in the process of leaving the EU. I think we all agree that it is important that that is done properly, and I will certainly be taking it up with my right hon. Friend the new Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union.

Deprived Communities: Infrastructure Investment

13. Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Whether his Department plans to maintain infrastructure investment in deprived communities at the level currently provided by the EU.

[905896]
17. Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): Whether his Department plans to maintain infrastructure investment in deprived communities at the level currently provided by the EU.

Mr Speaker: I call Minister Andrew Percy.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I share the House’s surprise.

This Government remain committed to investment in growth and infrastructure across all parts of the United Kingdom. As the former Prime Minister made clear, while the UK remains a member of the EU, current EU funding arrangements continue unchanged. It will be for the Government under the new Prime Minister to begin our negotiations to exit the European Union and set out the arrangements for those in receipt of EU funds.

Lilian Greenwood: It is marvellous to welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box. Nottingham has been allocated £10 million for its sustainable urban development strategy to fund projects that are critical to economic growth within the city and to provide vital public funding to support local businesses to grow and prosper. A further £7.8 million has been allocated for Nottingham and Derby’s metro area biodiversity action plan for restoring, opening up and connecting urban open spaces. What assurance will he give and our city council that these commitments will be maintained?

Andrew Percy: As I said a moment ago, as long as we are a member of the European Union, the funding regime remains as it is. We are working across Government to get the certainty we want; all of us share that ambition for when we do begin the process of exiting. I would say to the hon. Lady that major investment by this Government is not just limited to the funding that comes through the European Union. We have seen a massive programme of £12 billion of local growth fund investment, with 48 enterprise zones that have created 23,000 jobs and leveraged in £2.4 billion of private sector investment. We are committed as a Government to continuing to invest in infrastructure, such as HS2, of which I know she is a big supporter.

Tristram Hunt: May I, too, welcome the Minister to his job? He was part of a campaign which not only promised £350 million a week for the NHS if we left the European Union, but said that any lost EU funding would be matched by the Government. May I join my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), in trying to get him to confirm at the Dispatch Box that the £157 million from the EU destined for Stoke-on-Trent and north Staffordshire is underwritten by this Government? Mr Speaker, we have had enough of the Brexit baloney. Tell the potteries they are going to get their money.

Andrew Percy: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman took such an interest in my campaigning on the referendum in Brigge and Goole. We have made it absolutely clear that while EU funds have delivered some important support for growth and jobs, that has been only a small part of the much larger investment by this Government. It will be for the Government—in time, when we exit the European Union—to set out the funding arrangements and the guarantees. We hope to be able to work to get the certainty we require across Government once that process begins.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): May I welcome the Minister and all his colleagues to their places on the Front Bench? Is not one of the most important ways of delivering infrastructure for all communities to ensure that there is speed and certainty of delivery? Will my hon. Friend and his colleagues consider two things we can do swiftly in that respect? One is a major reform of the compulsory purchase legislation, which has been recommended by the Law Commission and is long overdue; the other is to follow up the suggestion of many observers that we would do well to increase the up-front level of compensation for infrastructure projects.

Andrew Percy: I thank the former Minister for his question. I can confirm on the point he makes about compulsory purchase, that the changes he wants were in the Queen’s Speech and will be in the Bill. He is of course absolutely right that we want certainty and to deliver on our infrastructure pledges as quickly and as swiftly as possible. I am more than happy to work with him, as a former Minister, to try to achieve just that.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Cornwall has received more EU funding than any other part of the country, but there are very real concerns about the current programme and the speed of access to the funds available. May I welcome the Minister to his new role? Is he prepared to meet me urgently to listen to these concerns and make sure that we can get every penny possible out of the EU before we leave?

Andrew Percy: I know of the work my hon. Friend has been doing in St Austell and Newquay on this issue. He is a doughty fighter for his constituents. I am happy to meet him this week to discuss just that.

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): Assurances on EU structural funds—£5.3 billion of funds for local government—is a key issue. With respect to the Minister, whom I welcome to his place, may I, as an MP representing a northern constituency, point out that only one of the top 15 infrastructure projects receiving the most public funding is in the north? What assurances can he give that leaving the EU will not widen the economic divide in our country, and what guarantees can he give that investment from the EU will be maintained up to and after Brexit for the UK?

Andrew Percy: I thank the shadow Minister for his kind words. If he had seen the new Prime Minister speak outside No. 10 when she took office, he would know that she is clear that delivering economic development across the United Kingdom outside London is a key priority. That is exactly what we have done through our devolution process, the local growth fund initiative, £12 billion of funding, and commitments such as High Speed 2 that go way beyond anything promised by the hon. Gentleman’s Government on transport in the north of England.
Mr Speaker: We are running late, but we must hear the voice of Shipley.

**Green-belt Land**

16. Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): What is my right hon. Friend's view on. My constituents in Burley-in-Wharfedale, and other villages such as Baildon and Eldwick, to name but a few, are facing planning proposals for green-belt land, with 500 houses proposed for Burley-in-Wharfedale alone. Surely the whole point of the green belt is that it should not be subject to housing, and particularly not until all brownfield sites in the district have been built on. My constituents do not trust Bradford council to look after their interests, so they look to the Government to protect them. What can my hon. Friend do to protect their interests and stop that building on the green belt?

Gavin Barwell: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words and wish his new Whip the best of luck.

If he looks through the national planning policy framework, he will see a clear description of what development is appropriate on the green belt, and a strong presumption that inappropriate development is harmful and should not be approved except in very special circumstances.

Mr Speaker: The Whip will certainly need to be a natural optimist.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [905923] Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I am delighted to have been appointed Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. I cannot wait to get on with the job, and particularly to deliver the huge number of houses that are so vitally needed across the UK. It is a great Department that will affect many lives. I also thank the previous Secretary of State and his Ministers for doing such a fantastic job. They will be a hard act to follow.

Karl McCartney: I welcome my broad-shouldered colleagues to their front-row positions. Given the Labour city council’s decision in Lincoln last Thursday deliberately to hide from my constituents and taxpayers, and the local media, the true cost of rebuilding the White bridge in Hartsholme park, what is my right hon. Friend’s view of councils who misuse the rules on exempt information because they do not want to be held accountable for their incompetence?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to be concerned about that issue. All councils have an obligation to disclose information unless there are compelling reasons not to do so. If he feels that the rules have been improperly applied, I recommend that he complains to the City of Lincoln Council, and if that does not work to the Information Commissioner’s Office. If that does work, he should come to me.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I, too, welcome the new Ministers, and particularly the new Housing Minister. We were both elected in 2010, we are both London MPs, and we have probably both seen our postbag grow with the housing crisis in London. Last week the National Audit Office reported on the Government’s progress in selling public land for 160,000 new homes. Will the Minister confirm that although the aim was to achieve £5 billion of land and property sales this Parliament, one year in, the Government have delivered only £72 million-worth of sales?

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words. I will write to her with the detailed figures, but I and the Secretary of State are committed to doing everything in our power to drive up the number of homes built in this country, and she is right to say that the release of public land is a key element of that programme.

Teresa Pearce: I thank the Minister for his response; perhaps he will want to write to me about the following question as well. The Department’s forecast shows that to meet the commitment to sell land for more than 160,000 homes, the Government will need to dispose of five times as much land as they did last year. The National Audit Office says that there is no mechanism to monitor the number of houses built. Given those concerns, is the Minister confident that he will meet his target, or will he revise it?

Gavin Barwell: We are absolutely determined to work with other Government Departments to ensure we maximise the amount of surplus public land we dispose of. As has been very clear in these discussions, there is a consensus across the House that we need to do everything we can to increase the number of homes being built.

T4. [905926] Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): In congratulating my right hon. Friend on his new position, may I seek his confirmation that he will support district councils that wish to retain their independence and status in two-tier local authorities?

Sajid Javid: We have no plans to change the tiering of authorities. My hon. Friend has my commitment that I will take that very seriously.

T3. [905925] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My local authority measures the delivery of new social housing by issue of completion certificates. The Secretary of State’s Department does it by site starts. Given that it is impossible for a site start to equate to a physical replacement, does the Secretary of State agree that the like-for-like replacement statistics to date are one big con?
Gavin Barwell: No, I do not accept that. The core of the Government’s policy is that, as we dispose of housing through the right-to-buy mechanism, replacement of housing is key. I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to address the particular concerns he raises, but that is the existing policy.

T8. [905930] Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): Given the Secretary of State’s family connections in the west of England, he will be aware that it negotiated a unique devolution deal with his predecessor. Will he confirm that that devolution deal, which will bring much-needed funding to the west of England, will still go ahead?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): I know my hon. Friend had some involvement in the deal, helping to achieve a consensus with local leaders. The west of England devolution agreement will see a new directly elected mayor and combined authority receive new powers to better manage transport across the area, linking new homes and people to the jobs and opportunities that we as a Government support with £900 million of significant new investment. The Government continue to work with local leaders to put in place the governance to deliver on the deal. I and my officials will continue to work to ensure that the Government deliver.

T5. [905927] Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): The Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), refused to confirm that the £157 million of EU structural funds for the potteries will be matched by the Government, so can I try his boss? Will the EU regeneration funds be matched by the Government, or have the Brexiters sold north Staffordshire down the river?

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Gentleman should just accept that Brexit means Brexit. The focus of the whole House should be on how best to deliver that. On EU funds, that is a fair question and a number of hon. Members have asked about that today. We need to reduce uncertainty. Now that the new Government are in place, we will certainly be working on this as an absolute priority.

T9. [905931] David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): The Minister will be aware that some people who provide social care are booked to do just a few minutes at each job and spend much of the day travelling at their own expense. This does not breach minimum wage legislation, but does the Minister agree that it is none the less wrong and that we should try to address it?

Sajid Javid: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The law is very clear: workers who are travelling as part of their work should be paid at least the minimum wage. If that is not happening, it should be reported. If my hon. Friend is aware of abuses, he should certainly do that immediately.

T10. [905932] Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): By 2020, Wales is expected to have received £1.9 billion from the European Structural and Investment Fund. In the light of Brexit, will the Secretary of State ensure that Wales will receive this funding to 2020? Will he pledge that the Government will continue to match European funding after we leave the EU?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Lady asks a very fair question. A number of firms and local regions have been asking just that. That is why, as I said earlier, this is an absolute priority now for the Government to make clear.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I warmly congratulate the Secretary of State on his appointment. Will he guarantee to the House that during his tenure as Secretary of State there will be no dilution whatever to the vital protections of the green belt?

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend for her warm words. The green belt is absolutely sacrosanct. We have made that clear; it was in the Conservative party manifesto and that will not change. The green belt remains special. Unless there are very exceptional circumstances, we should not be carrying out any development on it.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The proposed expansion of London City airport, a wholly private £314 million investment, will increase airport capacity in London and create hundreds of new jobs. When will the Secretary of State announce his planning decision on the application?

Sajid Javid: I understand the right hon. Gentleman’s concerns. I have just started looking at this case, and he will understand that I cannot say too much publicly at this point, but it is being taken very seriously.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry but we must move on. We have a very heavily subscribed set of exchanges today.
Terrorist Attack: Nice

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the terrorist attack in Nice and the threat we face from terrorism in the UK.

The full horror of last Thursday night’s attack on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice defies all comprehension. At least 84 people were killed when a heavy goods lorry was driven deliberately into crowds enjoying Bastille day celebrations. Ten of the dead are believed to have been children and teenagers. More than 200 people were injured and a number are in a critical condition. Consular staff on the ground are in touch with local authorities and assisting British nationals caught up in the attack, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is providing support to anyone concerned about friends or loved ones.

Over the weekend, the French police made a number of arrests, and in the coming weeks we will learn more about the circumstances behind the attack. These were innocent people enjoying national celebrations—they were families, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, daughters, sons, friends, and many of them were children. They were attacked in the most brutal and cowardly way possible, as they simply went about their lives. Our thoughts and prayers must be with the families who have lost loved ones, the survivors fighting for their lives, the victims facing appalling injuries and all those mentally scarred by the events of that night.

I have spoken to my counterpart, Bernard Cazeneuve, to offer him the sympathy of the British people and to make it clear that we stand ready to help in any way we can. We have offered investigative assistance to the French authorities and security support to the French diplomatic and wider community in London. This is the third terrorist attack in France in the last 18 months with a high number of deaths, and we cannot underestimate its devastating impact. We have also seen attacks in many other countries, and those killed and maimed by these murderers include people of many nationalities and faiths. Recently, we have seen attacks in Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Turkey and America, as well as the ongoing conflict in Syria, and last month we marked a year since 38 people—30 of them British—were murdered at a beach resort in Tunisia.

In the UK, the threat from international terrorism, which is determined by the independent joint terrorism analysis centre, remains at “severe”, meaning that an attack is “highly likely”. The public should be vigilant but not alarmed. On Friday, following the attack in Nice, the police and security and intelligence agencies took steps to review our security measures and ensure we had robust procedures in place, and I receive regular updates. All police forces have reviewed upcoming events taking place in their regions to ensure that security measures are appropriate and proportionate.

The UK has considerable experience in managing and policing major events. Extra security measures are used at particularly high-profile events, including—when the occasion demands—a jmpt—jmcrt—the deployment of the national barrier asset. This is made up of a range of temporary equipment, including security fences and gates, that enables the physical protection of sites. Since the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008, we have also taken steps to improve the response of police firearms teams and other emergency services to a marauding vehicle attack. We have provided counter-terrorism police funding for 2016-17 in real terms, and over the next five years, we are providing £143 million for the police to boost their firearms capability further.

We continue to test our response to terrorist attacks, including by learning the lessons from attacks such as those in France and through national exercises involving the Government, the military, the police, the ambulance and fire and rescue services and other agencies.

The threat from terrorism, however, is serious and growing. Our security and intelligence services are first rate, and they work tirelessly around the clock to keep the people of this country safe. Over the next five years, we will make an extra £2.5 billion available to those agencies, and that will include funding for an additional 1,900 staff at MI5, MI6 and GCHQ, as well as strengthening our network of counter-terrorism experts in the middle east, north Africa, south Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

We have also taken steps to deal with foreign fighters and to prevent radicalisation by providing new powers through the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, and we continue to take forward the Investigatory Powers Bill, which will ensure that the police, the security and the intelligence agencies have the powers they need to keep people safe in the digital age.

The UK has in place strong measures to respond to terrorist attacks, and since coming to office in 2010 the Government have taken significant steps to bolster that response, but Daesh and other terrorist organisations seek to poison people’s minds and they peddle sickening hate and lies to encourage people to plot acts of terrorism or leave their families to join terrorists. That is not just in France or this country, but in countries all around the world. We must confront that hateful propaganda and expose it for what it is.

In this country, that means working to expose the emptiness of extremism and safeguard vulnerable people from becoming radicalised. Our Prevent programme works in partnership with families, communities and civil society groups to challenge the poisonous ideology that supports terrorism. This includes supporting civil society groups to build their own capacity, and since January 2014 its counter-narrative products have had widespread engagement with communities. In addition, more than 1,000 people have received support since 2012 through Channel, the voluntary and confidential support programme for those at risk of radicalisation.

This is an international problem that requires an international solution, so we are working closely with our European partners, allies in the counter-Daesh coalition and those most affected by the threat that Daesh poses to share information, build counter-terrorism capability and exchange best practice.

As the Prime Minister has said, we must work with France and our partners around the world to stand up for our values and for our freedom. Nice was attacked on Bastille day, itself a French symbol of liberation and national unity. Terrorist attacks are an attempt to divide us and spread hatred, so our resounding response must be one of ever-greater unity between different nations but also between ourselves. This weekend we saw unity in action...
as people came together to support each other. People sent messages of condolence, and Muslims in this country and around the world have said that those who carry out such attacks do not represent the true Islam.

I want to end by sending a message to our French friends and neighbours. What happened in Nice last Thursday was cruel and incomprehensible. The horror and devastation is something many people will live with for the rest of their lives. We know you are hurting; we know this will cause lasting pain. Let me be quite clear: we will stand with you; we will support you in this fight, and together with our partners around the world, we will defeat those who seek to attack our way of life.

3.38 pm

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): I start by welcoming the Home Secretary to her new position and welcoming her well-judged and heartfelt words to the House today. She spoke for us all in condemning this nauseating attack, and in sending our sympathy and solidarity to the families affected and to the French people. From the very outset of the right hon. Lady’s tenure, let me assure her of my ongoing support in presenting a united front from this House to those who plan and perpetrate these brutal acts.

It is a sad reflection of the dark times in which we live that this is the third time in the last nine months that we have gathered to discuss a major terrorist incident in mainland Europe. Each new incident brings new factors and changes perceptions of the nature of the threat posed by modern terrorism—and this one was no different. This was an act of indiscriminate and sickening brutality, made all the more abhorrent by the targeting of families and children. Ten children and babies were killed, 50 are still being treated, and many more have been orphaned and left with lasting psychological scars. Unlike other attacks, this was not planned by a cell with sophisticated tactics and weapons. A similar attack could be launched anywhere at any time, and that is what makes it so frightening and so difficult to predict and prevent.

Let me start with the question of whether there are any immediate implications for the United Kingdom. On Friday, a spokeswoman for the Prime Minister said that UK police were “reviewing” security plans for “large public events” taking place this week. What conclusions were reached as part of that review, and were any changes made in the light of it? Will the Home Secretary be issuing any updated security advice to the organisers of the numerous large public gatherings and festivals that will take place throughout the country over the rest of the summer? We welcome the Mayor of London’s confirmation that the Metropolitan police were reviewing safety measures in the capital. Can the Home Secretary confirm that similar reviews are taking place in large cities throughout the United Kingdom?

After the attacks in Paris, the Home Secretary’s predecessor committed herself to an urgent review of our response to firearms attacks. It has been suggested in the French media that if armed officers had been on the scene more quickly in Nice, they could have prevented the lorry from travelling as far as it did. Has the review that was commissioned been completed, and if so, what changes in firearms capability are proposed as a result? In the wake of Paris, the Home Secretary’s predecessor also promised to protect police budgets, but that has not been honoured, and there are real-terms cuts this year. Will the new Home Secretary pledge today to protect police budgets in real terms?

The Home Secretary mentioned the Prevent programme. I have to say that I do not share her complacent view of what it is achieving. In fact, some would say that it is counter-productive, creating a climate of suspicion and mistrust and, far from tackling extremism, creating the very conditions for it to flourish. The Government’s own Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation has said that the whole programme “could benefit from independent review.”

Will the Home Secretary accept Labour’s call for a cross-party review of how the statutory Prevent duty is working?

Immediately after the attack, it was described in the media as an act of Islamic terrorism, but it is now clear that the lifestyle of the individual had absolutely nothing to do with the Islamic faith, and the French authorities have cast doubt on whether there was any link between him and Daesh. Does the Home Secretary agree that promptly labelling this attack Islamic terrorism hands a propaganda coup to the terrorists, whose whole purpose is to deepen the rift between the Muslim community and the rest of society? Does she agree that more care should be taken with how such atrocities are labelled in future?

This was, of course, the first attack in Europe since the European Union referendum. Can the Home Secretary assure the House that, in these times, she and the wider Government are making every effort to maintain strong collaboration with the French and the European authorities, and to send them the clear message that, whatever our differences, Britain will always be by their side and ready to help?

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) for his comments, and for his confirmation at an early stage that we work across the House to address and to fight this dangerous terrorism, and will be able to continue to do so.

The right hon. Gentleman asked particularly about the reviewing of public events. Let me reassure him, and the whole House, that we are constantly ensuring that we make expert advice available to the people who run such events. We have 170 counter-terrorism security advisers who are in touch with all of them—including, when necessary, those in large cities—so that they can be given the right advice. That advice is being taken, so that we can ensure that people are as safe as possible.

The right hon. Gentleman made some comments about Prevent. Let me correct him on one point. There is nothing complacent about what the Government do to address terrorism and dangerous ideology. I accept that there is always more to do, but the right hon. Gentleman should not underestimate what the Prevent strategy has achieved so far. Many people have been deterred from going to Syria. Many children have been introduced to the strategy at school, and people in the public sector have benefited from it and been prevented from going to Syria. There is always more to do, but a lot is being accomplished by this strategy.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman made some comments about the reporting in the press about the role and the word of Islam, and I simply say to him that I think it is
for all faiths and all people to unite against the barbarity of this attack, and that is the clear message that this House should convey.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): As chair of our groupe d’amitié between the two Parliaments, may I just encourage my good friend the Secretary of State—we have served on the Council of Europe together on many of these issues—donne-à nos amis Français notre solidarité, nos pensées et notre encouragement? Nous sommes avec vous maintenant et pour toujours.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is entirely right: nous sommes avec vous—and now I will return to English. I was able to speak to my French counterpart this morning, Bernard Cazeneuve, and I also say, in part response to my hon. Friend, that of course we will continue our very strong friendship and mutual support for the French whatever the outcome.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the Home Secretary on her new role, and welcome her to her place. I trust she will bring to her role the rigour and wit she displayed on behalf of the SNP in the recent campaign during the EU referendum. I also thank the fact that we are both graduates of Edinburgh University of about the same vintage will enable us to work together in the same constructive fashion as I hope I did with her predecessor.

There are no words to describe adequately the unspeakable horror, the merciless cruelty and the senselessness of the attack perpetrated in Nice last week. One’s heart goes out to the victims, the bereaved and the injured, especially the children. I wish to add the condolences of myself and my colleagues on the SNP with her comments about the gravity we all feel to those who strive to keep us safe, whether it be the police or the intelligence services.

Scotland, like the rest of the UK, stands in sadness and solidarity with France, a country that has already had to bear way more than any country should be expected to. We stand ready to offer whatever assistance we can. While there are no doubt challenges that we face from this increasingly savage criminality and terrorism, the Scottish National party Benches to the people of France. I welcome the tone of the Home Secretary’s statement and thank her for notice of it, and I would like to associate myself and the SNP with her comments about the gratitude we all feel to those who strive to keep us safe, whether it be the police or the intelligence services.

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her comments and her introductory remarks, and also for repeating the same message we have received from the Opposition: that we will all work together on addressing this dangerous issue. She asked a number of key questions, and I of course reassure her that I hope there will never be anything knee-jerk in our response to such events. I hope we will be able to build on the experiences we have in order to get a more secure future.

The hon. and learned Lady has asked us to work across communities, and I imagine she meant devolved communities as well as all faith communities, and of course we will do that. I am reminded, because we have already had questions about large events, and on example of us working with devolved Administrations was when we worked together on the Glasgow Commonwealth games in 2014 jointly to combat any terrorism there.

Finally on Calais, the hon. and learned Lady is absolutely right that we need to work closely with our French counterparts and I did discuss that this morning with Bernard Cazeneuve, and I will take that forward with him to make sure we get the best outcome.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): May I welcome my right hon. Friend to her new position and thank her for her measured, assured and authoritative statement? Does she agree that both the previous Prime Minister and our new Prime Minister have always made it clear that there is a distinction between the ideology of Islamist extremism, which animates organisations such as Daesh and is driven by prejudice and hate, and the great religion of Islam, a religion of peace that brings spiritual nourishment to millions? Is it not vital in the days ahead that while we focus on countering extremism, we also underline the benefits that the faith of Islam has brought to so many?

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that important point so eloquently, as is often the case. He is absolutely right to say that we need to make that distinction, and I say once more that it is for all faiths and all people to unite together to make sure we condemn this dreadful terrorism.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Home Secretary to her new position and remind her that her predecessor had a career-enhancing 20 appearances before the Select Committee during her time in office—I hope she will continue with that engagement in her new office. Reports have emerged from France, from Bernard Cazeneuve and Manuel Valls, that the perpetrator of this atrocity had been radicalised very quickly by the internet. Does the Home Secretary agree that whatever the truth of this as it emerges, the internet remains a key battleground in our fight against terrorism? Will she do all she can to work with Europol and Interpol to make the internet companies do more to take down those subversive videos?
Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question, and of course I look forward to every one of my appearances before his Select Committee. He raises an important point about how people are radicalised. First, I must suggest a moment of caution, because we do not know the answer on that yet; we perhaps know some of the examples of where this person was not radicalised, but we do not know exactly how he was radicalised, and that investigation is going on. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that making sure that the internet is not used as a dangerous tool for radicalising people is incredibly important. We do have a strategic communications unit, based in the Foreign Office, which takes down websites, but we will always make sure we do as much as possible to address that particular source.

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her elevation to the Home Office. May I ask her, given that she emphasised the global threat of terrorism, whether any lessons have been learned from this latest terrorist attack for the security arrangements for the Olympic games? We will not have an opportunity to discuss that, so is she satisfied that the efforts that our security services are putting in will mean that our participants will be safe?

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for the question, and I can reassure him that we are already engaged with the people who are running the Olympics in Brazil to make sure that we make the games as safe as possible. Our London Olympics team went over to ensure that that was the case. We think we have substantial expertise here, and we are happy to share it, particularly where there are large events such as the Olympics.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary to her new post. Terrorism is aptly named, as it thinks up new and more awful ways of committing mass murder. What discussions has she had with the intelligence and security services about unconventional weapons being used in terrorism? Given that Nice is a provincial city in France, can she tell me honestly that my constituents in Wolverhampton enjoy the same level of protection against terrorism as people living in London?

Amber Rudd: I am here to reassure the right hon. Gentleman and his constituents that we are doing all we can to ensure that they and all of our constituents are kept safe, and we will always keep particular incidents under review to make sure that we can give people as much certainty as possible. One thing we are particularly focused on is large crowds and big events, and the Security Service and the police will be monitoring and reviewing particular events, or places of large gatherings, to ensure that we keep people safe.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Our security forces have to overcome huge inhibitions before deciding to open fire on someone who poses a lethal threat to innocent people. Can the Home Secretary confirm that if such a decision is made, the intention must be to stop the threat in its tracks, which invariably means shooting to kill, not to wound?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend puts it very well. Clearly, the priority must be to save innocent lives. We must always ensure that our security forces and police firearms officers have not only the right tools and equipment but the right permissions to do what is necessary to keep us all safe.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I too welcome the Home Secretary to her new role albeit in such tragic circumstances.

Media reports today state that, unlike with previous terrorist attacks in France, no clear link has yet been established between the person who committed these terrible offences and recognised terrorist groups. Can she confirm that that is the case and, if so, tell us what steps the UK Government are taking to address this rather worrying development?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I must point out that we are talking about a French citizen in Nice, and that we are awaiting further information. I think she is drawing attention to potential radicalisation from the internet, which some people are suggesting is what happened in this case. We will of course keep the matter under review and see what other action we can take, but we must wait to see what the conclusions are.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Hundreds of thousands of British families will already have booked holidays this summer, and many of them will be going to the French Riviera, to Paris or to some of the other wonderful cities around France. Will the Home Secretary work with the Foreign Secretary to ensure that British families are given common-sense guidance to keep them safe during the holidays? I hope that none of them will change their plans, so that part of our standing side by side with the French people will involve many British families enjoying holidays in France this year.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He has put his finger on exactly what a lot of people will be thinking at the moment. I would advise him, his constituents and friends who are concerned to check the Foreign Office website. We will ensure that there is always as much helpful and current information on it as possible.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary tell us what progress is being made to ensure that the Investigatory Powers Bill reaches the statute book? She will know that the powers in the Bill are essential for supporting the security services in dealing with potential lone attackers, profiling such attackers and ensuring that we use the internet to protect our safety as well as the liberty of individuals.

Amber Rudd: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. He is right that the Investigatory Powers Bill will give us additional help to intercept the sort of terrorism that created the events of last weekend. I hope that we will be able to get it on the statute book by the end of the year. This is exactly the sort of event that makes it even more pressing for us to do so.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): The Secretary of State might be aware that, in the Home Affairs Committee’s inquiry into radicalisation and home-grown terrorism, we took evidence on the alarming trend of online radicalisation, especially of loners and low-level criminals. She has mentioned the internet, and social media sites
were found not to be robust enough in either removing or blocking content posted by Daesh and its affiliates, which is uploaded only to terrorise or to groom would-be terrorists. Will she undertake a review of social media sites and their ability to be used to groom vulnerable people?

**Amber Rudd:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. It is critical that we address the radicalisation that can happen through social media and internet sites. That is why we have a strategic communication unit based in the Foreign Office, and we are focused on taking down websites of that kind. We will continue to keep the matter under review to ensure that we do as much as possible.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I welcome the new Home Secretary to her role and echo her condolences to the families and friends of those who were so senselessly murdered. The massacre of the innocents in Nice will strengthen the resolve of all who believe in democracy and freedom to confront terrorists wherever in the world they strike. When our closest ally is under attack, does the Home Secretary agree that the UK must use all the organisations and measures at our disposal to help, including Interpol, Europol and the European arrest warrant, and that the closest possible co-operation is our best defence against the murderous activities of terrorists or lone wolves?

**Amber Rudd:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments and for the Liberal Democrats’ support for the consensus in the House to stand with our allies—our friends—in France. He is right that we need a close relationship with our allies, both European and those from outside Europe, to ensure that we deepen knowledge and share information to combat terrorism. I will ensure that we continue to do that.

**Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): Tourist destinations and travel interchanges have tragically been the targets of evil terrorist acts. Will the Home Secretary provide a firm assurance that Gatwick airport will receive the necessary security resources to ensure that those travelling through will be safe this summer and beyond?

**Amber Rudd:** I am pleased that my hon. Friend raises that point, because I am keen to reassure everybody that that is exactly what will happen. We will continue to keep our airports under constant review—we must. We will do so by ensuring that everyone who works at Gatwick lives around it and travels through it as safe as possible.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement and wish her well in her new role. Our hearts ache for all those who have lost loved ones in France and elsewhere.

According to interviews in the media, it seems that security levels in Nice and across France were reduced after the Euros. The United Kingdom has been at a high level of readiness for some years—since 2010 in Northern Ireland. Does the Home Secretary accept that the threat level will be severe for the foreseeable future, that the general public must be vigilant, careful and responsive and that, now more than ever, the exchange of intelligence between the security forces of western countries must continue?

**Amber Rudd:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He is absolutely right that the terror threat level is already at severe, and that we must all be vigilant. We will continue to take that approach until we have any other information to the contrary, but our current status, given that so many people want to do us harm, is that we must be vigilant.

**Robert Jenrick** (Newark) (Con): Once upon a time, it was useful to refer to lone wolves—individuals who would attack without any institutional support. Does my right hon. Friend agree that such people do not exist today? Due to the internet and online radicalisation, behind every lone wolf is a pack of wolves supporting them online. Will she make it a priority as Home Secretary to tackle online radicalisation so that we can be better protected in the future?

**Amber Rudd:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. A theme is emerging of many Members asking questions about the radicalisation of people through the internet. I will indeed ensure that we put extra effort into tackling that and keeping it under review, and that we take down the relevant websites as often as possible.

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary to her new post. The shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), rightly said that a similar terrible attack could happen anywhere at any time. Salford’s policing resources are already stretched by high levels of crime, including stablings and shootings, in addition to the new threats. Can the Home Secretary assure me that she will protect Great Manchester police’s budget so that the police can protect my constituents?

**Amber Rudd:** The police play a critical role in ensuring that we are all kept safe, which is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister protected the police budget in last year’s review. However, I will certainly take a careful look at all spending within the police budget to ensure that the maximum amount is available for the clear, visible policing on our streets that plays such an important part in deterring criminal activity.

**James Berry** (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): In light of the budget announcement that the Home Secretary has just referred to, will she confirm that the Metropolitan police has increased its armed response vehicle capacity, that this country’s armed officers have the capacity to neutralise a threat like that in Nice and that we have the most professional armed officers in the world?

**Amber Rudd:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are very proud of the high standards of our professional armed officers, and we announced in April that the number of armed police would increase by more than 1,000 over the next two years. Additional round-the-clock specialist teams are being set up outside London, and 40 additional police armed response vehicles are on our streets.
John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I was on the Promenade des Anglais on Thursday evening, watching the fireworks with the crowd, and was very lucky to leave just a few minutes before the attack. The haunting sight for me, having been so fortunate not to have seen the carnage itself, came on my drive to the airport. The Promenade des Anglais is a busy thoroughfare, and the flowers for the victims stretched on and on and on—truly, it will haunt me for a long time.

Is the Home Secretary as troubled as I am by the tension between our natural human desire to focus in on the horror of events such as these—that is the focus of the world’s media and the focus of Parliament in statements such as this—and the inevitable extra publicity that that gives to the terrorists, who want to show that they can create a level of carnage and disruption far beyond what their military capability would otherwise allow?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for sharing his experience with us. Such personal stories make the tragedy come to life for us. He raises the important point that we want people to be vigilant and aware, but we do not want to give the terrorists the sort of publicity that they want. Our intelligence is that, because we are making progress against them and against Daesh in general, they are now trying to find ways of lashing out and being dangerous. It is right that we know that this is taking place, so that everybody can be vigilant against it.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): May I welcome my right hon. Friend to her new position? As it is some time since the announcement was made of the recruitment of 1,900 more security staff, can the Home Secretary tell the House how many have so far been recruited?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I cannot give him the exact number at the moment, but I can tell him that we have made good progress, and that I will write to him with that number.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): May I wish the right hon. Lady well in her appointment? With many British citizens due to take part in Battle of the Somme events this year, will she do all she can to ensure that visits go ahead and that we have good co-operation with our French allies so that British people taking part can be safe and secure?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that it is essential that such events go on, particularly when we are remembering something like the Battle of the Somme—the scale of the massacre there puts some of the difficulties that we have here in perspective. I will indeed engage with my French counterpart to ensure that we do all that we can to give France the support that it needs to keep everybody safe.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): May I congratulate the Home Secretary on her statement and welcome her and her team to their roles? Does she agree that whether we are in or out of Europe, Britain and France must stand together to tackle terrorism, tackle human trafficking, keep our borders safe and secure and uphold the Le Touquet treaty? In that way, our two nations are safer, stronger and more secure.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. National security remains the sole responsibility of member states, and we will continue to work bilaterally with France, sharing information and deepening our relationship so that we can ensure that we keep both our countries safe.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary to her post. She is right to condemn these vicious atrocities in Nice. After the Paris attacks in November, her predecessor, the new Prime Minister, committed to a review of firearms responses in the United Kingdom. Can she update the House on how that review has gone and whether any changes have been instigated as a result of it?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman. That review is ongoing—it is not finished yet, but I will make sure that I get him an update of where we are so that he is fully informed.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her place and condemn this barbarous attack, as everyone else has done.

I welcome the extra money that my right hon. Friend has mentioned. Is she happy that the training facilities for the armed police will be sufficient to meet the extreme use to which they may be put, such as storming buildings to rescue hostages? That will require a high level of skill, investment and training.

Amber Rudd: We have some of the best armed officers in the world to undertake such a response, and we are in no doubt that we will take all necessary action to keep our people safe. If that requires additional training or expertise, we will take that seriously and keep it constantly under review to make sure that we can deliver it.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary to her post. This horrific attack was carried out using no specialised equipment, but it is not enough for us to play catch-up and think about how to protect people from a lorry attack. We should be imagining the unthinkable and pre-empting and taking precautions against every method of attack. Without going into detail, of course, can the Home Secretary give us assurances that the security services are doing that?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the type of weapon that was used in this case. I repeat that there is an ongoing investigation in France. We have no further information or details, but we are keeping large events under particular review, so that we can ensure that the people promoting or hosting such events always have the important information that they need to keep the attendees safe.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): The murderous rampage of this evil terrorist was eventually halted by armed police in Nice. Will the Home Secretary reiterate how satisfied she is with the availability of armed rapid response units in our regional towns and cities?
Amber Rudd: We will continue to keep that under review to ensure that we always keep people safe. Over the next five years, for example, we are providing £143 million for the police to further boost their firearms capability. No risk will be taken with security.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): As well as deploying its security services and its police force, France has deployed more than 10,000 of its army personnel and has talked about calling up 55,000 reservists. During the Olympics, the British military played an important part in our security. May I assume that the Home Secretary is talking to the Secretary of State for Defence about the lessons that the British military can teach about ensuring security at large events?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady raises an important point about the value of collaboration between the Ministry of Defence and the Home Department to ensure that we always get the best outcome. We have done that work previously, and I look forward to continuing it with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Will the Home Secretary say a little more about the defence measures that we might have against such an attack taking place in the UK, and particularly about the ability of potential terrorists to get hold of, for example, a commercial vehicle?

Amber Rudd: We have particular assets that we use to combat such an attack. We have, for instance, the national barrier asset when the police assess that there is a risk of vehicle attacks. My hon. Friend may have seen those barriers—big plastic items set up outside areas of risk to combat exactly such an attack. We will make them available to areas where there are to be big gatherings, which are exactly the sorts of area that could be most vulnerable.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary to her new role. Last year the Opposition joined the Government in supporting the introduction of measures to restrict the movements of jihadists returning to the UK. Can the Home Secretary say how often those powers have been used?

Amber Rudd: I am certainly aware that we have those powers, and we are using them. Of course, the best thing is to try to discourage such people from going in the first place, but we are also making sure that we use those powers to stop them when they come back, and potentially to arrest them. I am happy to write to the hon. Lady to give her more information about the numbers.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I was privileged to attend an inter-faith Eid celebration dinner last night hosted by the Ahmadiyya community—a group that the new Prime Minister is aware of, and a fine example of a group teaching love, not hatred, and committed to helping local communities by raising hundreds of thousands of pounds for UK charities. Does the Home Secretary agree that we need to work with our Muslim communities to ensure that they are not targeted by hate crimes in the UK and that they are not linked to appalling attacks, which they condemn?

Mr Speaker: Order. People ought to show some sensitivity to the mores of the House. Forgive me, but that question was far too long.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the role of communities and faith groups in making sure that the sort of terrorism we have seen, and the sort of hate that can sometimes apparently grow up so easily, is combated early on. I join her in congratulating that group.
UK’s Nuclear Deterrent

4.15 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I beg to move.

That this House supports the Government’s assessment in the 2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review that the UK’s independent minimum credible nuclear deterrent, based on a Continuous at Sea Deterrence posture, will remain essential to the UK’s security today as it has for over 60 years, and for as long as the global security situation demands, to deter the most extreme threats to the UK’s national security and way of life and that of the UK’s allies; supports the decision to take the necessary steps required to maintain the current posture by replacing the current Vanguard Class submarines with four Successor submarines; recognises the importance of this programme to the UK’s defence industrial base and in supporting thousands of highly skilled engineering jobs; notes that the Government will continue to provide annual reports to Parliament on the programme; recognises that the UK remains committed to reducing its overall nuclear weapon stockpile by the mid-2020s; and supports the Government’s commitment to continue work towards a safer and more stable world, pressing for key steps towards multilateral disarmament.

The Home Secretary has just made a statement about the attack in Nice, and I am sure the whole House will join me in sending our deepest condolences to the families and friends of all those killed and injured in last Thursday’s utterly horrifying attack in Nice—innocent victims brutally murdered by terrorists who resent the freedoms that we treasure and want nothing more than to destroy our way of life.

This latest attack in France, compounding the tragedies of the Paris attacks in January and November last year, is another grave reminder of the growing threats that Britain and all our allies face from terrorism. On Friday I spoke to President Hollande and assured him that we will stand shoulder to shoulder with the French people, as we have done so often in the past. We will never be cowed by terror. Though the battle against terrorism may be long, these terrorists will be defeated, and the values of liberté, égalité and fraternité will prevail.

I should also note the serious events over the weekend in Turkey. We have firmly condemned the attempted coup by certain members of the Turkish military, which began on Friday evening. Britain stands firmly in support of Turkey’s democratically elected Government and institutions. We call for the full observance of Turkey’s constitutional order and stress the importance of the rule of law prevailing in the wake of this failed coup. Everything must be done to avoid further violence, to protect lives and to restore calm. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has worked around the clock to provide help and advice to the many thousands of British nationals on holiday or working in Turkey at this time. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has spoken to the Turkish Foreign Minister, and I expect to speak to President Erdogan shortly.

Before I turn to our nuclear deterrent, I am sure the House will welcome the news that Japan’s SoftBank Group intends to acquire UK tech firm ARM Holdings. I have spoken to SoftBank directly. It has confirmed its commitment to keep the company in Cambridge and to invest further to double the number of UK jobs over five years. This £24 billion investment would be the largest ever Asian investment in the UK. It is a clear demonstration that Britain is open for business—as attractive to international investment as ever.

There is no greater responsibility as Prime Minister than ensuring the safety and security of our people. That is why I have made it my first duty in this House to move today’s motion so that we can get on with the job of renewing an essential part of our national security for generations to come.

For almost half a century, every hour of every day, our Royal Navy nuclear submarines have been patrolling the oceans, unseen and undetected, fully armed and fully ready—our ultimate insurance against nuclear attack. Our submariners endure months away from their families, often without any contact with their loved ones, training relentlessly for a duty they hope never to carry out. I hope that, whatever our views on the deterrent, we can today agree on one thing: that our country owes an enormous debt of gratitude to all our submariners and their families for the sacrifices they make in keeping us safe. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]

As a former Home Secretary, I am familiar with the threats facing our country. In my last post, I was responsible for counter-terrorism for over six years. I received daily operational intelligence briefings about the threats to our national security, I chaired a weekly security meeting with representatives of all the country’s security and intelligence agencies, military and police, and I received personal briefings from the director-general of MI5. Over those six years as Home Secretary I focused on the decisions needed to keep our people safe, and that remains my first priority as Prime Minister.

The threats that we face are serious, and it is vital for our national interest that we have the full spectrum of our defences at full strength to meet them. That is why, under my leadership, this Government will continue to meet our NATO obligation to spend 2% of our GDP on defence. We will maintain the most significant security and military capability in Europe, and we will continue to invest in all the capabilities set out in the strategic defence and security review last year. We will meet the growing terrorist threat coming from Daesh in Syria and Iraq, from Boko Haram in Nigeria, from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, from al-Shabaab in east Africa, and from other terrorist groups planning attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan. We will continue to invest in new capabilities to counter threats that do not recognise national borders, including by remaining a world leader in cyber-security.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Ukraine would have been less likely to have lost a sizeable portion of its territory to Russia had it kept its nuclear weapons, and that there are lessons in that for us?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there are lessons. Some people suggest to us that we should actually be removing our nuclear deterrent. This has been a vital part of our national security and defence for nearly half a century now, and it would be quite wrong for us to go down that particular path.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I offer the Prime Minister many congratulations on her election. Will she be reassured that whatever she is
about to hear from our Front Benchers, it remains steadfastly Labour party policy to renew the deterrent while other countries have the capacity to threaten the United Kingdom, and that many of my colleagues will do the right thing for the long-term security of our nation and vote to complete the programme that we ourselves started in government?

The Prime Minister: I commend the hon. Gentleman for the words that he has just spoken. He is absolutely right. The national interest is clear. The manifesto on which Labour Members of Parliament stood for the right. The national interest is clear. The manifesto on for the words that he has just spoken. He is absolutely committed to a minimum, credible, independent nuclear capability, delivered through a Continuous At-Sea Deterrent.” I welcome the commitment that he and, I am sure, many of his colleagues will be giving tonight to that nuclear deterrent by joining Government Members of Parliament in voting for this motion.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I add my congratulations to the right hon. Lady on her new role. If keeping and renewing our nuclear weapons is so vital to our national security and our safety, does she accept that the logic of that position must be that every single other country must seek to acquire nuclear weapons, and does she really think that the world would be a safer place if it did? Our nuclear weapons are driving proliferation, not the opposite.

The Prime Minister: No, I do not accept that at all. I have to say to the hon. Lady that, sadly, she and some Labour Members seem to be the first to defend the country’s enemies and the last to accept these capabilities when we need them.

None of this means that there will be no threat from nuclear states in the coming decades. As I will set out for the House today, the threats from countries such as Russia and North Korea remain very real. As our strategic defence and security review made clear, there is a continuing risk of further proliferation of nuclear weapons. We must continually convince any potential aggressors that the benefits of an attack on Britain are far outweighed by their consequences; and we cannot afford to relax our guard or rule out further shifts that would put our country in grave danger. We need to be prepared to deter threats to our lives and our livelihoods, and those of generations who are yet to be born.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Of course, when SNP Members go through the Lobby tonight, 58 of Scotland’s 59 MPs will be voting against this. What message is the Prime Minister sending to the people of Scotland, who are demonstrating, through their elected representatives, that we do not want Trident on our soil?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that that means that 58 of the 59 Scottish Members of Parliament will be voting against jobs in Scotland that are supported by the nuclear deterrent.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for giving way and congratulate her on her appointment. She mentioned the security threat that the country faces from terrorism. What does she say to those who say that it is a choice between renewing the Trident programme and confronting the terrorist threat?

The Prime Minister: I say that it is not a choice. This country needs to recognise that it faces a variety of threats and ensure that we have the capabilities that are necessary and appropriate to deal with each of them. As the Home Secretary has just made clear in response to questions on her statement, the Government are committed to extra funding and extra resource going to, for example, counter-terrorism policing and the security and intelligence agencies as they face the terrorist threat, but what we are talking about today is the necessity for us to have a nuclear deterrent, which has been an insurance policy for this country for nearly 50 years and I believe that it should remain so.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

The Prime Minister: I would like to make a little progress before I take more interventions.

I know that there are a number of serious and very important questions at the heart of this debate, and I want to address them all this afternoon. First, in the light of the evolving nature of the threats that we face, is a nuclear deterrent really still necessary and essential? Secondly, is the cost of our deterrent too great? Thirdly, is building four submarines the right way of maintaining our deterrent? Fourthly, could we not rely on our nuclear-armed allies, such as America and France, to provide our deterrent instead? Fifthly, do we not have a moral duty to lead the world in nuclear disarmament, rather than maintaining our own deterrent? I will take each of those questions in turn.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on her surefootedness in bringing this motion before the House and at last allowing Parliament to make a decision in this Session? We will proudly stand behind the Government on this issue tonight. I encourage her to tell the Scots Nats that if they do not want those jobs in Scotland, they will be happily taken in Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for the support that he and his colleagues will show tonight.

Mike Gapes: I congratulate the right hon. Lady on becoming Prime Minister. Will she confirm that, when the Labour Government of Clement Attlee took the decision to have nuclear weapons, they had to do so in a very dangerous world, and that successive Labour Governments kept those nuclear weapons because there was a dangerous world? Is it not the case that now is also a dangerous time?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Of course, the last Labour Government held votes in this House on the retention of the nuclear deterrent. It is a great pity that there are Members on the Labour Front Bench who fail to see the necessity of the nuclear deterrent, given that in the past the Labour party has put the British national interest first when looking at the issue.
I want to set out for the House why our nuclear deterrent remains as necessary and essential today as it was when we first established it. The nuclear threat has not gone away; if anything, it has increased.

First, there is the threat from existing nuclear states such as Russia. We know that President Putin is upgrading his nuclear forces. In the past two years, there has been a disturbing increase in both Russian rhetoric about the use of nuclear weapons and the frequency of snap nuclear exercises. As we have seen with the illegal annexation of Crimea, there is no doubt about President Putin’s willingness to undermine the rules-based international system in order to advance his own interests. He has already threatened to base nuclear forces in Crimea and in Kaliningrad, the Russian enclave on the Baltic sea that neighbours Poland and Lithuania.

Secondly, there is the threat from countries that wish to acquire nuclear capabilities illegally. North Korea has stated a clear intent to develop and deploy a nuclear weapon, and it continues to work towards that goal, in flagrant violation of a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP) rose—

The Prime Minister: I am going to make some progress. North Korea is the only country in the world to have tested nuclear weapons this century, carrying out its fourth test this year, as well as a space launch that used ballistic missile technology. It also claims to be attempting to develop a submarine-launch capability and to have withdrawn from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Based on the advice I have received, we believe that North Korea could already have enough fissile material to produce more than a dozen nuclear weapons. It also has a long-range ballistic missile, which it claims can reach America, and which is potentially intended for nuclear delivery. There is, of course, the danger that North Korea might share its technology or its weapons with other countries or organisations that wish to do us harm.

Thirdly, there is the question of future nuclear threats that we cannot even anticipate today. Let me be clear why this matters. Once nuclear weapons have been given up, it is almost impossible to get them back, and the process of creating a new deterrent takes many decades. We could not redevelop a deterrent fast enough to respond to a new and unforeseen nuclear threat, so the decision on whether to renew our nuclear deterrent hinges not just on the threats we face today, but on an assessment of what the world will be like over the coming decades.

It is impossible to say for certain that no such extreme threats will emerge in the next 30 or 40 years to threaten our security and way of life, and it would be an act of gross irresponsibility to lose the ability to meet such threats by discarding the ultimate insurance against those risks in the future. With the existing fleet of Vanguard submarines beginning to leave service by the early 2030s, and with the time it takes to build and test new submarines, we need to take the decision to replace them now.

Maintaining our nuclear deterrent is not just essential for our own national security; it is vital for the future security of our NATO allies.
about 13p in every £100 of Government spending. There is also a significant economic benefit to the renewal of our nuclear deterrent, which might be of interest to members of the Scottish National party.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): The Prime Minister quite rightly paid tribute to our submariners. Will she also pay tribute to the men and women working in our defence industries who will work on Successor? They are highly skilled individuals who are well paid, but such skills cannot just be turned on and off like a tap when we need them. Does she agree that it is vital for the national interest to keep these people employed?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly important point. Our nuclear defence industry makes a major contribution to our defence industrial base. It supports more than 30,000 jobs across the United Kingdom, and benefits hundreds of suppliers across more than 350 constituencies. The skills required in this industry, whether in engineering or design, will keep our nation at the cutting edge for years to come. Along with the hon. Gentleman, I pay tribute to all those who are working in the industry and, by their contribution, helping to keep us safe.

**David Morris** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her place as Prime Minister. Does she agree with me that, like the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), I have quite a lot of people in my constituency who are working in the defence industry, the nuclear power industry and the science sector? Will it not be a kick in the teeth for my constituents if we do not agree to this deterrent today?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Some constituencies—obviously, Morecambe and Lunesdale, and Barrow and Furness—are particularly affected by this, but as I have just said, there are jobs across about 350 constituencies in this country that are related to this industry. If we were not going to renew our nuclear deterrent, those people would of course be at risk of losing their jobs as a result.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**The Prime Minister:** I will give way to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), and then I will make some progress.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I hope that the Prime Minister will come on to explain how a like-for-like replacement for Trident complies with article 6 of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

**The Prime Minister:** I will come on to the whole question of nuclear proliferation a little later, if the right hon. Gentleman will just hold his fire.

**Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Will the Prime Minister confirm for me and the House that the vast majority of the cost involved will be invested in jobs, skills and businesses in this country over many decades? This is an investment in our own security. It is not about outsourcing, but about keeping things safe at home.

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is about jobs here in the United Kingdom, and it is also about the development of skills here in the United Kingdom that will be of benefit to our engineering and design base for many years to come.

The decision will also specifically increase the number of jobs in Scotland. HM Naval Base Clyde is already one of the largest employment sites in Scotland, sustaining around 6,800 military and civilian jobs, as well as having a wider impact on the local economy. As the base becomes home to all Royal Navy submarines, the number of people employed there is set to increase to 8,200 by 2022. If hon. Members vote against today’s motion, they will be voting against those jobs. That is why the Unite union has said that defending and securing the jobs of the tens of thousands of defence workers involved in the Successor submarine programme is its priority.

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): On the issue of jobs, there is a lot of steel in Successor submarines, so will the Prime Minister commit to using UK steel for these developments?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman might have noticed that the Government have looked at the Government procurement arrangements in relation to steel. Obviously, where British steel is good value, we would want it to be used. For the hon. Gentleman’s confirmation, I have been in Wales this morning and one of the issues I discussed with the First Minister of Wales was the future of Tata and the work that the Government have done with the Welsh Government on that.

I will now turn to the specific question of whether building four submarines is the right approach, or whether there are cheaper and more effective ways of providing a similar effect to the Trident system. I think the facts are very clear. A review of alternatives to Trident, undertaken in 2013, found that no alternative system is as capable, resilient or cost-effective as a Trident-based deterrent. Submarines are less vulnerable to attack than aircraft, ships or silos, and they can maintain a continuous, round-the-clock cover in a way that aircraft cannot, while alternative delivery systems such as cruise missiles do not have the same reach or capability. Furthermore, we do not believe that submarines will be rendered obsolete by unmanned underwater vehicles or cyber-techniques, as some have suggested. Indeed, Admiral Lord Boyce, the former First Sea Lord and submarine commander, has said that we are more likely to put a man on Mars within six months than make the seas transparent within 30 years. With submarines operating in isolation when deployed, it is hard to think of a system less susceptible to cyber-attack. Other nations think the same. That is why America, Russia, China and France all continue to spend tens of billions on their own submarine-based weapons.

Delivering Britain’s continuous at-sea deterrence means that we need all four submarines to ensure that one is always on patrol, taking account of the cycle of deployment, training, and routine and unplanned maintenance. Three submarines cannot provide resilience against unplanned refits or breaks in serviceability, and neither can they deliver the cost savings that some suggest they would, since large fixed costs for infrastructure, training and maintenance are not reduced by any attempt to cut
from four submarines to three. It is therefore right to replace our current four Vanguard submarines with four Successors. I will not seek false economies with the security of the nation, and I am not prepared to settle for something that does not do the job.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I was listening carefully to the question from the leader of the Scottish National party about cost. Is it not clear that, whatever the cost, he and his party are against our nuclear deterrent? Scottish public opinion is clear that people in Scotland want the nuclear deterrent. When my right hon. Friend the Scottish Secretary votes to retain the nuclear deterrent tonight, he will be speaking for the people of Scotland, not the SNP.

The Prime Minister: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend; he put that very well indeed.

Let me turn to the issue of whether we could simply rely on other nuclear armed allies such as America and France to provide our deterrent. The first question is how would America and France react if we suddenly announced that we were abandoning our nuclear capabilities but still expected them to put their cities at risk to protect us in a nuclear crisis. That is hardly standing shoulder to shoulder with our allies.

At last month’s NATO summit in Warsaw, our allies made it clear that by maintaining our independent nuclear deterrent alongside America and France we provide NATO with three separate centres of decision making. That complicates the calculations of potential adversaries, and prevents them from threatening the UK or our allies with impunity. Withdrawing from that arrangement would weaken us now and in future, undermine NATO, and embolden our adversaries. It might also allow potential adversaries to gamble that one day the US or France might not put themselves at risk to deter an attack on the UK.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): It is all very well looking at the cost of building and running the submarines, but the cost of instability in the world if there is no counterbalance reduces our ability to trade and reduces GDP. This is not just about what it costs; it is about what would happen if we did not have this system and there was more instability in the world.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a valid and important point, and this issue must be looked at in the round, not just as one set of figures.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her appointment. I shall be voting for the motion this evening because I believe that the historical role of the Labour party and Labour Governments has been on the right side of this issue. I love the fact that she is showing strong support for NATO, but there is a niggle: have we the capacity and resources to maintain conventional forces to the level that will match our other forces?

The Prime Minister: The answer to that is yes—we are very clear that we face different threats and need different capabilities to face them. We have now committed to 2% of GDP being spent on defence, and we have increased the defence budget and the money that we spend on more conventional forces.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her new role, but let us cut to the chase: is she personally prepared to authorise a nuclear strike that could kill 100,000 innocent men, women and children?

The Prime Minister: Yes. The whole point of a deterrent is that our enemies need to know that we would be prepared to use it, unlike the suggestion that we could have a nuclear deterrent but not actually be willing to use it, which seemed to come from the Labour Front Bench.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I am sure the Prime Minister is aware that Russia has 10 times the amount of tactical nuclear weapons as the whole of the rest of NATO. On a recent Defence Committee visit to Russia, we were told by senior military leaders that they reserved the right to use nuclear weapons as a first strike. Should that not make us very afraid if we ever thought of giving up our nuclear weapons?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. As I pointed out earlier, Russia is also modernising its nuclear capability. It would be a dereliction of our duty, in terms of our responsibility for the safety and security of the British people, if we were to give up our nuclear deterrent.

We must send an unequivocal message to any adversary that the cost of an attack on our United Kingdom or our allies will always be far greater than anything it might hope to gain through such an attack. Only the retention of our own independent deterrent can do this. This Government will never endanger the security of our people and we will never hide behind the protection provided by others, while claiming the mistaken virtue of unilateral disarmament.

Let me turn to the question of our moral duty to lead nuclear disarmament. Stopping nuclear weapons being used globally is not achieved by giving them up unilaterally. It is achieved by working towards a multilateral process. That process is important and Britain could not be doing more to support this vital work. Britain is committed to creating the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons, in line with our obligations under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: I am going to make some more progress.

We play a leading role on disarmament verification, together with Norway and America. We will continue to press for key steps towards multilateral disarmament, including the entry into force of the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty and for successful negotiations on a fissile material cut-off treaty. Furthermore, we are committed to retaining the minimum amount of destructive power needed to deter any aggressor. We have cut our nuclear stockpiles by over half since their cold war peak in the late 1970s. Last year, we delivered on our commitment
to reduce the number of deployed warheads on each submarine from 48 to 40. We will retain no more than 120 operationally available warheads and we will further reduce our stockpile of nuclear weapons to no more than 180 warheads by the middle of the next decade.

Britain has approximately 1% of the 17,000 nuclear weapons in the world. For us to disarm unilaterally would not significantly change the calculations of other nuclear states, nor those seeking to acquire such weapons. To disarm unilaterally would not make us safer. Nor would it make the use of nuclear weapons less likely. In fact, it would have the opposite effect, because it would remove the deterrent that for 60 years has helped to stop others using nuclear weapons against us.

Our national interest is clear. Britain’s nuclear deterrent is an insurance policy we simply cannot do without. We cannot compromise on our national security. We cannot outsource the grave responsibility we shoulder for keeping our people safe and we cannot abandon our ultimate safeguard out of misplaced idealism. That would be a reckless gamble: a gamble that would enfeeble our allies and embolden our enemies; a gamble with the safety and security of families in Britain that we must never be prepared to take.

We have waited long enough. It is time to get on with building the next generation of our nuclear deterrent. It is time to take this essential decision to deter the most extreme threats to our society and preserve our way of life for generations to come. I commend this motion to the House.

4.48 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): May I start by welcoming the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) and congratulating her on her appointment as Prime Minister? I wish her well in that position, and I am glad that her election was quick and short. I commend the remarks the Prime Minister made about the horrific events in Nice. What happened was absolutely horrific: the innocent people who lost their lives. One hopes it will not be repeated elsewhere. I was pleased she mentioned the situation in Turkey, and I support her call for calm and restraint on all sides in Turkey. After the attempted coup, I called friends in Istanbul and Ankara and asked what was going on. The older ones felt it was like a repeat of the 1980 coup and were horrified that bombs were falling close to the Turkish Parliament. Can we please not return to a Europe of military coups and dictatorships? A gamble with the safety and security of families in Britain that we must never be prepared to take.

We have waited long enough. It is time to get on with building the next generation of our nuclear deterrent. It is time to take this essential decision to deter the most extreme threats to our society and preserve our way of life for generations to come. I commend this motion to the House.

The motion says nothing about the ever-ballooning costs. In 2006, the MOD estimated that construction costs would be £20 billion, but by last year that had risen by 50% to £31 billion, with another £10 billion added as a contingency fund. The very respected hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) has estimated the cost at £167 billion, though it is understood that delays might have since added to those credible figures—I have seen estimates as high as over £200 billion for the replacement and the running costs.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Is not the true cost the one we remember every Remembrance Sunday—the millions of lives we lost in two world wars? Would the right hon. Gentleman care to estimate the millions of lives that would have been lost in the third conventional war that was avoided before 1989 because of the nuclear deterrent?

Jeremy Corbyn: We all remember, on Remembrance Sunday and at other times, those who lost their lives. That is the price of war. My question is: does our possession of nuclear weapons make us and the world more secure? [Hon. Members: “Yes!”] Of course, there is a debate about that, and that is what a democratic Parliament does—it debates the issues. I am putting forward a point of view. The hon. Gentleman might not agree with it, but I am sure he will listen with great respect, as he always does.

Ian Paisley: In the past, the Labour leader’s solution to a domestic security threat was to parley with the Provisional IRA. What would his tactics be in dealing with a threat to all the peoples of this nation?

Jeremy Corbyn: Towards the end of her speech, the Prime Minister mentioned the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and multilateral disarmament. I was interested in that. Surely we should start from the basis that we want, and are determined to bring about, a nuclear-free world. Six-party talks are going on with North Korea. China is a major economic provider to North Korea. I would have thought that the relationship with China and North Korea was the key to finding a way forward.

Jeremy Corbyn: I, too, have Korean constituents, as do many others, and we welcome their work and participation in our society. I was making the point that the six-party talks are an important way forward in bringing about a peace treaty on the Korean peninsula, which is surely in everybody’s interests. It will not be easy—I fully understand that—but nevertheless it is something we should be trying to do.

I would be grateful if the Prime Minister, or the Defence Secretary when he replies, could let us know the Government’s estimate of the total lifetime cost of what we are being asked to endorse today.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?
Jeremy Corbyn: No. It is hardly surprising that in May 2009 an intense debate went on in the shadow Cabinet about going for a less expensive upgrade by converting to air-launched missiles. The right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) said at the time that “the arguments have not yet been had in public in nearly an adequate enough way to warrant the spending of this nation’s treasure on the scale that will be required.”—[Official Report, 20 April 2009; Vol. 491, c. 84.]

Seven years later, we are perhaps in the same situation.

The motion proposes an open-ended commitment to maintain Britain’s current nuclear capability for as long as the global security situation demands. We on the Opposition Benches, despite our differences on some issues, have always argued for the aim of a nuclear-free world. We might differ on how to achieve it, but we are united in our commitment to that end.

In 2007, my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) embarked on a meaningful attempt to build consensus for multilateral disarmament. Will the Government address where these Successor submarines are going to be based? The people of Scotland have rejected Trident’s being based in Faslane naval base on the Clyde—the SNP Government are opposed to it, as is the Scottish Labour party.

We are debating not a nuclear deterrent but our continued possession of weapons of mass destruction. We are discussing eight missiles and 40 warheads, with each warhead believed to be eight times as powerful as the atomic bomb that killed 140,000 people in Hiroshima in 1945. We are talking about 40 warheads, each one with a capacity to kill more than 1 million people.

What, then, is the threat that we face that will be deterred by the death of more than 1 million people? It is not the threat from so-called Islamic State, with its poisonous death-cult that glories in killing as many people as possible, as we have seen brutally from Syria to east Africa and from France to Turkey. It has not deterred our allies Saudi Arabia from committing dreadful acts in Yemen. It did not stop Saddam Hussein’s atrocities in the 1980s or the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. It did not deter the war crimes in the Balkans in the 1990s, nor the genocide in Rwanda. I make it clear today that I would not take a decision that killed millions of innocent people. I do not believe that the threat of mass murder is a legitimate way to go about dealing with international relations.

Mr Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): As Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend will be privy to briefings from the National Security Council. Will he explain when he last sought and received such a briefing and what is his assessment of the new Russian military protocols that permit first strike using nuclear weapons and that say that they can be used to de-escalate conventional military conflicts?

Jeremy Corbyn: Britain, too, currently retains the right to first strike, so I would have thought that the best way forward would be to develop the nuclear non-proliferation treaty into a no first strike situation. That would be a good way forward. I respect my hon. Friend’s wish to live in a nuclear-free world. I know he believes that very strongly.

I think we should take our commitments under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty very seriously. In 1968, the Labour Government led by Harold Wilson inaugurated and signed the non-proliferation treaty. In 2007, the then Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South rightly said that “we must strengthen the NPT in all its aspects” and referred to the judgment made 40 years ago that “the eventual abolition of nuclear weapons was in all of our interests.”

The then Labour Government committed to reduce our stocks of operationally available warheads by a further 20%. I congratulate our Government on doing that. Indeed, I attended an NPT review conference when those congratulations were spoken. Can the Government say what the Labour Foreign Secretary said in 2007 when she said that her “commitment to the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons is undimmed”? Is this Government’s vision of a nuclear-free world undimmed? My right hon. Friend also spoke as Foreign Secretary of the “international community’s clear commitment to a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone”.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: I will not give way.

Indeed, at the last two nuclear non-proliferation treaty five-yearly review conferences there was unanimous support for a weapons of mass destruction-free zone across the middle east, which surely we can sign up to and support. I look forward to the Defence Secretary’s support for that position when he responds to the debate.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is speaking about previous party policy. At the shadow Cabinet meeting last Tuesday, it was agreed that current party policy would be conveyed by Front Benchers. When will we hear it?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for his view. As he well knows, the party decided that it wanted to support the retention of nuclear weapons. We also decided that we would have a policy review, which is currently being undertaken by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis).

My hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) is as well aware as I am of the existing policy. He is also as well aware as I am of the views on nuclear weapons that I expressed very clearly at the time of the leadership election last year, hence the fact that Labour Members will have a free vote this evening.

Other countries have made serious efforts—

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Jeremy Corbyn: I will come to my hon. Friend in a moment. Other countries have made serious efforts to bring about nuclear disarmament within the terms of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. South Africa abandoned
Mr Kevan Jones: Like me, my right hon. Friend stood in May 2015 on the basis of a party policy which had been agreed at our conference, through our mechanisms in the party, and which supported the renewal of our continuous at-sea deterrent. He now has a shadow Front Bench and a shadow Cabinet in his own image, who, I understand, agreed last week to present that policy from the Front Bench. Is he going to do it, or will it be done by the Member who winds up the debate?

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend is well aware of what the policy was. He is also well aware that a policy review is being undertaken, and he is also well aware of the case that I am making for nuclear disarmament.

Caroline Lucas: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, a multilateral process is currently taking place at the United Nations. More than 130 countries are negotiating, in good faith, for a treaty to ban nuclear weapons. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the Government’s refusal even to attend, let alone take part in, that process raises serious questions about their commitment to a world without nuclear weapons?

Jeremy Corbyn: I think it is a great shame that the Government do not attend those negotiations, and I wish they would. I thank them for attending the 2014 conference on the humanitarian effects of war, and I wish to move into other contracts and other work. We also have to look at the issues of employment and investment. We need Government intervention through a defence diversification agency, as we had under the previous Labour Government, to support industries that have become over-reliant on defence contracts and wish to move into other contracts and other work.

The Prime Minister mentioned the Unite policy conference last week, which I attended. Unite, like other unions, has members working in all sectors of high-tech manufacturing, including the defence sector. That, of course, includes the development of both the submarines and the warheads and nuclear reactors that go into them.
Unite’s policy conference endorsed its previous position of opposing Trident but wanting a Government who will put in place a proper diversification agency. The union has been thinking these things through and wants to maintain the highly skilled jobs in the sector.

Our defence review is being undertaken by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) for her excellent work on the review. [Interjection.] Whatever people’s views—

Caroline Flint rose—

\[Jeremy Corbyn\]

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Caroline Flint rose—

\[Jeremy Corbyn\]: All right, I will give way—[Interjection.]

\[Mr Speaker\]: Order. I think the right hon. Gentleman has signalled an intention to take an intervention, but before he does—[Interjection.] Order. I just make the point that there is a lot of noise, but at the last reckoning—[Interjection.]

\[Mr Speaker\]: Order. I will tell the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) what the position is, and he will take it whether he likes it or not. Fifty-three Members wish to speak in this debate, and I want to accommodate them. I ask Members to take account of that to help each other.

Caroline Flint: Under the last Labour Government, because of our stand on supporting non-proliferation, as a nuclear deterrent country we were able to influence a large reduction in the number of nuclear warheads around the world. Does my right hon. Friend really think that if we abandoned our position as one of the countries that holds nuclear weapons, we would have as much influence without them as with them?

\[Jeremy Corbyn\]: We did indeed help to reduce the number of nuclear warheads. Indeed, I attended a number of conferences where there were British Government representatives, and the point was made that the number of UK warheads had been reduced and other countries had been encouraged to do the same. I talked about the nuclear weapons-free zones that had been achieved around the world, which are a good thing. However, there is now a step change, because we are considering saying that we are prepared to spend a very large sum on the development of a new generation of nuclear weapons. I draw my right hon. Friend’s attention to article VI of the NPT—I am sure she is aware of it—which requires us to “take steps towards disarmament”. That is what it actually says.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

\[Jeremy Corbyn\]: I am not going to give way any more, because I am up against the clock.

In case it is not obvious to the House, let me say that I will be voting against the motion tonight. I am sure that will be an enormous surprise to the whole House. I will do that because of my own views and because of the way—

\[Mr Jamie Reed\]: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

\[Mr Speaker\]: I apologise for having to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, but we have a point of order.

\[Mr Reed\]: I seek your guidance, Mr Speaker, on the accuracy of the language used by the Leader of the Opposition. We are not voting tonight on new nuclear warheads; we are voting simply on the submarines used to deploy those missiles. That is fundamentally different from new missiles.

\[Mr Speaker\]: The answer to the hon. Gentleman is that it is up to each right hon. and hon. Member to read the motion, interpret it as he or she thinks fit, and make a judgment accordingly. It is not a matter for the Chair.

\[Jeremy Corbyn\]: The issue of course is the submarines, but it is also the new weapons that will have to go into those submarines as and when they have been built—if they are built.

We should pause for a moment to think about the indiscriminate nature of what nuclear weapons do and the catastrophic effects of their use anywhere. As I said, I have attended NPT conferences and preparatory conferences at various times over many years, with representatives of all parties in the House. I was very pleased when the coalition Government finally, if slightly reluctantly, accepted the invitation to take part in the humanitarian effects of war conference in Vienna in 2014. Anyone who attended that conference and heard from British nuclear test veterans, Pacific islanders or civilians in Russia or the United States who have suffered the effects of nuclear explosions cannot be totally dispassionate about the effects of the use of nuclear weapons. A nuclear weapon is an indiscriminate weapon of mass destruction.

Many colleagues throughout the House will vote for weapons tonight because they believe they serve a useful military purpose. But to those who believe in multilateral disarmament, I ask this: is this not an unwise motion from the Government, giving no answers on costs and no answers on disarmament? For those of us who believe in aiming for a nuclear-free world, and for those who are deeply concerned about the spiralling costs, this motion has huge questions to answer, and they have failed to be addressed in this debate. If we want a nuclear weapons-free world, this is an opportunity to start down that road and try to bring others with us, as has been achieved to some extent over the past few decades. Surely we should make that effort rather than go down the road the Government are suggesting for us this evening.

\[Several hon. Members rose\]—

\[Mr Speaker\]: Order. In accordance with usual practice, no time limit on Back-Bench speeches will apply until after all the Front-Bench opening speeches have been made. That said, sensitivity to the very large demand is of the essence, and extreme self-discipline is required.

5.14 pm

\[Dr Julian Lewis\] (New Forest East) (Con): I have often had the pleasure of debating this topic with the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), both in and outside the House, but never in either of our wildest dreams or nightmares did we imagine that
one day he would end up as leader of the Labour party. It only goes to show the unpredictability of political developments.

After the Falklands war, opponents of our strategic deterrent often pointed out that our Polaris submarines had done nothing to deter Argentina from invading the islands. However, there never was and never will be any prospect of a democratic Britain threatening to launch our nuclear missiles except in response to the use of mass destruction weapons against us. But just because we would build at threatening to launch nuclear weapons except when our very existence was at stake, that does not mean that dictators share our scruples, our values or our sense of self-restraint.

An example from history will do. Following the horror of the poison gas attacks in the first world war, it was widely expected that any future major conflict would involve large-scale aerial bombardments drenching cities and peoples with lethal gases. Why did Hitler not do that? Because Churchill had warned him that British stocks of chemical weapons greatly exceeded his own, and that our retaliation would dwarf anything that Nazi Germany could inflict. Poison gases are not mass destruction weapons, but nerve gases are, and Hitler seriously considered using them against the allies in 1943. He did not do so because his principal scientist, Otto Ambros, advised him that...
[Dr Julian Lewis]

one argues that the threat to retaliate is itself immoral, is it as immoral as the failure to forestall so many preventable deaths?

Moral choices are, more often than not, choices to determine the lesser of two evils. The possession of the nuclear deterrent may be unpleasant, but it is an unpleasant necessity, the purpose of which lies not in its ever being fired but in its nature as the ultimate insurance policy against unpredictable, future, existential threats. It is the ultimate stalemate weapon, and in the nuclear age stalemate is the most reliable source of security available to us all.

5.23 pm

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): May I begin by joining the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister in their comments about the unhappy developments in both France and Turkey? I also understand that the Prime Minister needs to leave the debate shortly to attend to some important matters, so I will give her a wink when I finish the consensual stuff, which I want to start with—genuinely—because this is the first opportunity that I have had in the House to wish her well as Prime Minister. I also wish her husband, Philip, well. I do not know him, but we all know how important the support that we get at home is. It will be a test for both of them. We will not agree on many things, but where we do, we will, and where we do not, we will remain the effective Opposition in the House of Commons.

From my experience on the Intelligence and Security Committee I also know a little bit about the national security responsibilities that the Home Secretary has to enact, and the challenges get even bigger when one becomes Prime Minister. I wish her strength and wisdom in dealing with matters that are potentially life and death questions. Those are matters for the Home Secretary and for the Prime Minister and we wish her well.

I am pleased that the Prime Minister has led in this debate. That was not the plan of the Government. Perhaps in the new style of the new Government she thought that, on this important issue, she should lead, and we very much welcome that, because this is a huge matter. It will probably be the biggest spending decision by this Government. Given that—and I will come back to this—I find it utterly remarkable that a number of hours into this debate, we still have no idea whatsoever of what the through-life costs of Trident replacement are. We can have different views on whether Trident is a good thing or a bad thing and on whether it is necessary, but I have asked the Prime Minister twice about that number. She has the opportunity to intervene on me now and give us that number. She is not going to intervene, because she would prefer not to say it. It is for her to explain. No doubt, her special advisers will be asked by the fourth estate why it is that the Government are asking us to vote for something, but cannot tell us how much it will cost. It is remarkable that in this, the biggest—

Simon Hoare: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Angus Robertson: I will take an intervention from the Prime Minister, unless the hon. Gentleman can give us that number. Can he give that number to the House now? [HON. MEMBERS: “No!”]
In that respect, it is hugely disappointing that she clearly has not taken any time to consider—perhaps to reconsider—the wisdom of spending an absolute fortune on something that can never be used and is not deterring the threats that we face today. I say again that we have not yet had any confirmation of what the Government plan to spend on this; they expect Members on both the Labour Benches and the Government Benches to sign a blank cheque for it.

I am sorry that the Prime Minister has clearly not given any new or detailed consideration to embracing the non-replacement of Trident, which would offer serious strategic and economic benefits, as outlined in the June 2013 report, “The Real Alternative”. Those who have not read the report should do so.

In the previous debate that took place in this House on 20 January 2015—a debate called by the SNP on Trident replacement, with support from Plaid Cymru and the Green party, and I think I am right in saying that it was co-sponsored by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn)—we outlined the advantages, including:

- "improved national security—through budgetary flexibility in the Ministry of Defence and a more effective response to emerging security challenges in the 21st century”
- "improved global security—through a strengthening of the non-proliferation regime, deterring nuclear proliferation and de-escalation of international tensions”.

There are also potential

- "vast economic savings—of more than £100 billion over the lifetime of a successor nuclear weapons system, releasing resources for effective security spending, as well as a range of public spending priorities”.—[Official Report, 20 January 2015; Vol. 591, c. 92.]

This seems to be pretty important, given that, when the Ministry of Defence was asked about it in a written question in February 2015, the then Defence Minister, the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), who is not in his place but was here earlier—I gave him notice that I would be raising this matter—replied that the estimated annual spending on the Trident replacement programme beyond maingate in 2016 was

- "being withheld as it relates to the formulation of Government policy and release would prejudice commercial interests.”

Here today we are part and parcel of formulating Government policy, and we are expected to sign a blank cheque. We have absolutely no idea what the final cost will be. The hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, has made a calculation—perhaps he will speak about it, if he catches your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker. He worked out that the in-service costs of a missile extension—the total cost of the Trident replacement programme—would be £167 billion.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that in response to a freedom of information request on the full-life costs, the MOD said:

“The government needs a safe space away from the public gaze to allow it to consider policy options . . . unfettered from public comment about the affordability”?

Angus Robertson: I suppose we should ask ourselves whether that “safe space” is the House of Commons. We are none the wiser. We have asked again and again and again. I am looking at the Defence Secretary again and he has the opportunity to intervene on me now to tell Parliament how much money his Government wish to invest in the Successor programme. Update, there came none.

It is not just about the cost; for us in Scotland, it is also about democracy. The people of Scotland have shown repeatedly, clearly and consistently that we are opposed to the renewal of nuclear weapons. When the SNP went to the country—the electorate—on an explicitly anti-Trident manifesto commitment, we won elections in 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2016. I am delighted to be joined on the Front Bench by my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), who represents Faslane and Coulport because the electorate of Argyll and Bute preferred an SNP parliamentarian, elected on a non-Trident platform, to a Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat MP.

However, this is much, much more than an issue of party political difference, because in Scottish public and civic life, from the Scottish Trades Union Congress, to Scotland’s Churches—the Church of Scotland and the Bishops’ Conference, which issued a statement this week—to the Scottish Parliament, which has voted on the subject, all have voted or called for opposition to Trident renewal. There is cross-party support from not just the SNP, but the Greens and Scottish Labour. Almost every single one of Scotland’s MPs will vote tonight against Trident’s replacement.

It is an indictment of the new Administration that the first motion in Parliament is on renewing Trident when there are so many other pressing issues facing the country in the context of Brexit. It is obscene that the priority of this Government, and, sadly, too many people on the Labour Benches, at a time of Tory austerity and economic uncertainty following the EU referendum, is to spend billions of pounds on outdated nuclear weapons that we do not want, do not need and could never use. With debt, deficit and borrowing levels forecast to get worse after Brexit, and with more than £40 billion to be cut from public services by 2020, spending £167 billion, £179 billion, or £205 billion—whatever the number is that the Government are not prepared tell us—is an outrage. The Prime Minister’s first vote is on Trident. In the current climate, that is totally wrong. It is the wrong approach to key priorities. We should be working to stabilise the economy and sorting out the chaos caused by the Brexit result.
The Prime Minister has already undermined the words of her first speech, which many people, across all parties, found important. She vowed to fight “burning injustice”, and we agree, but Trident fights no injustices. Trident is an immoral, obscene and redundant weapons system.

The vote on Trident is one of the most important this Parliament will ever take, and the Government have an obligation to inform the public about such a massive decision—they have failed to do that. The Labour Opposition is facing three ways at the same time and letting the Government get away with this. We in the SNP are absolutely clear in our opposition to Trident. We would not commit to spending hundreds of billions of pounds on weapons of mass destruction, particularly at a time when this Government are making significant cuts to public services—it would be morally and economically indefensible.

Mr Harper: I am listening carefully to my hon. Friend’s remarks. He said that we have capped defence expenditure at 2% of GDP. My understanding is that we have a floor for defence spending of at least 2% of GDP. I do not think that he is factually right.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon) indicated assent.

Mr Harper: I see the Secretary of State for Defence nodding at my remarks.

Crispin Blunt: My right hon. Friend is technically right, but it would be a triumph of hope over expectation that we are going to see more than 2% spent on defence any time soon. When that happens, and if this is taken in isolation, to be spent outside the defence budget, then I will accept that my arguments need to be re-evaluated, but as things are set now, the budget for this weapons system comes at the cost of the rest of our defence budget.

Britain’s independent possession of nuclear weapons has turned into a political touchstone for commitment to national defence, but this is an illusion. The truth is that this is a political weapon aimed, rather effectively, at the Labour party. Its justification rests on the defence economics, the politics, and the strategic situation of over three decades ago, but it is of less relevance to the United Kingdom today, and certainly surplus to the needs of NATO. It does not pass any rational cost-effectiveness test. Surely the failures in conventional terms, with the ignominious retreats from Basra and Helmand in the past decade, tell us that something is badly out of balance in our strategic posture.

Let us not forget the risks that this weapons system presents to the United Kingdom. Basing it in Scotland reinforces the nationalist narrative, and ironically, for a system justified on the basis that it protects the United Kingdom, it could prove instrumental in the Union’s undoing.

We were told last November that the capital cost for the replacement of the four Vanguard submarines would be £31 billion, with a contingency fund of £10 billion. We have been told that the running costs of the Successor programme will be 6% of the defence budget. Following the comments of the right hon. Member for Moray, my latest calculation is £179 billion for the whole programme.

Mr Kevan Jones: The hon. Gentleman’s figure is now being used widely. I asked the House of Commons Library and various think-tanks whether they could break it down. They have been unable to do so. Could he explain how he gets to that figure?

Crispin Blunt: Yes, it is extremely straightforward. It is 6% of 2% of GDP on the basis of the Government’s proposed in-service dates of the system. The defence budget is 2% of GDP, and this is 6% of that share. That presents us with the number. It is not surprising that the number should be 6% of GDP, which is double the share of the defence budget in the 1980s, because the share of GDP spent on defence has halved since the 1980s.

The costs of this project are enormous. I have asked privately a number of my hon. Friends at what point they believe that those costs become prohibitive. I cannot get an answer, short of, “Whatever it takes,” but I do not...
believe that an answer of infinity is rational. It is not only damaging to our economic security; it also comes at a deeply injurious opportunity cost to conventional defence. At what point do either of those prices cease to be worth paying?

The costs are likely to rise much further. The standard programme risks, which are already apparent with the Astute programme, and the currency risk pale when compared with the technical risk of this project. There is a growing body of evidence that emerging technologies will render the seas increasingly transparent in the foreseeable future. Under development are distributed sensors detecting acoustic, magnetic, neutrino and electromagnetic signatures, on board unmanned vehicles in communication with each other, using swarming algorithms and autonomous operations associated with artificial intelligence, able to patrol indefinitely and using the extraordinary processing capabilities now available and improving by the month. The geometric improvement in processing power means that that technology in today’s smartphone is far superior to that of the latest American fighter aircraft. Furthermore, unmanned aircraft will detect the surface weight of deeply submerged submarines communicating with those underwater receiving active sonar. Marine biologists are already able to track shoals of fish in real time from several hundred miles away.

Ballistic submarines depend utterly on their stealth by utilising the sheer size of the oceans, but if we are today able to detect the gravitational waves first created by big bang, how can we be so confident that a capable adversary would not be able to track our submarines 20 to 40 years from now? The system vulnerabilities are not restricted to its increasingly detectable signatures. What about the security of the Trident system against cyber-attack?

Part of the Government’s case is that all the other P5 states are also investing in submarine technology for their nuclear weapon systems. It would not be the first time that states have followed each other down a dreadnought blind alley, but the UK is the only nuclear-armed state to depend entirely on a submarine. If NATO’s technical head of anti-submarine warfare can foresee the end of the era of the submarine, our P5 colleagues will at least have their bets laid off. We won’t.

5.47 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op):
It is a pleasure to follow that imaginative speech by the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt). I only wish he had brought in his fag packet so that we could have better understood the figures he tried to explain, but to no avail.

I am proud, unlike the people who are acting for our Front Bench today, to speak for the Labour party in this debate. It is the party of Attlee and Bevin, Nye Bevan and Stafford Crips—the men who witnessed the terrible birth of nuclear destruction and understood, with heavy hearts, that they should protect the world by building the capacity to deter others from unleashing it again.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my friend for giving way. A nuclear deterrent also protects our soldiers in the field. Many of us, including my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), were soldiers in Germany. We took great comfort from the fact that we had nuclear weapons, because the other side—the Warsaw pact—could well have blasted us to hell, but they were put off, we hope very much, by the fact that we possessed nuclear weapons. Protection of our soldiers matters and is good for morale.

John Woodcock: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Those who wish to eradicate nuclear weapons from the United Kingdom cannot explain what would happen if, for example, Russia invaded a NATO state and there was no nuclear protection from our side and we were open to nuclear blackmail on a dreadful scale.

I am pleased to stand alongside members of Unite and GMB who have come down here to remind us of just how effective the workforce is and how important they are to so many parts of the United Kingdom. I am also proud that I will be in the same Lobby as the former Labour Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett), who committed the United Kingdom—the first time any nuclear-capable nation had done so—to a global zero: a world free from nuclear weapons. But—the Leader of the Opposition did not seem to want to mention this—she knew that unilaterally disarming while others keep the bomb is not an act of global leadership. That would not show others the way; it would be destabilising and a futile abdication of responsibility.

I also speak for the Labour Members and trade unionists who engaged in our policy making in good faith. Those people are now being ignored by the party leader, who clings to an idea of Labour party democracy to save his own skin, and that is not right. The party leader’s Trident review has never quite materialised, so let me mention the report of the Back-Bench Labour defence committee, which I chair. After hearing from 23 expert witnesses in 10 sessions, which many MPs attended—although not the shadow Foreign Secretary, anyone from the office of the Leader of the Opposition or the shadow International Development Secretary, who seems to want to take part in the debate via Twitter but who does not, apparently, want to stand up for herself—we found that there had been no substantive change in the circumstances that led the Labour party firmly to support renewing the Vanguard class submarines that carry the deterrent.

For the official Opposition to have a free vote on a matter of such strategic national importance is a terrible indictment of how far this once great party has fallen. There has long been a principled tradition of unilateralism in the Labour party. I was born into it, as the son of a Labour party member who protested at Greenham common. But what Labour’s current Front Benchers are doing is not principled. It shows contempt for the public and for party members. In what they say, Labour’s current Front Benchers often show contempt for the truth. The situation would have been abhorrent even to Labour’s last great unilateralist, Michael Foot—a man who, for all his shortcomings as a leader, would never have allowed our party to stand directionless in the face of such an important question.

We do not know what is going to happen to the Labour party; this is an uncertain time. Whatever happens, I am proud to stand here today and speak for Barrow. I am proud to speak for the town that is steeped in the
great British tradition of shipbuilding, and to speak for the men and women who give great service to their country with the incredible work that they do. So I will walk through the Aye Lobby tonight to vote in favour of a project that the last Labour Government began, in a vote that Labour itself promised when we sat on the Government Benches.

Failing to endorse a submarine programme that will support up to 30,000 jobs across the UK would not only do great damage to our manufacturing base; it would be a clear act of unilateral disarmament. It would tell the public that we are prepared to give more credence to improbable theories and wild logic than to the solid weight of evidence that points to renewing Trident. It is our enduring duty to do what we can to protect the nation for decades ahead, so I hope my colleagues will join me in supporting established Labour policy in the Aye Lobby tonight.

5.53 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): That was one of the most courageous speeches I have heard during my time in the House.

I am very sad that the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) is not here. When we last debated the matter in 2007, he was in his place and I was sitting on the Opposition Benches. He swept his arm to his right and said that we in the home counties could not understand what it was like to have such a powerful weapon on our doorsteps. I pointed out to him that if he came into my bedroom and looked across the Kennet valley, he would see the rooftops of the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston; if he looked slightly to his left, he would see the rooftops of the Royal Ordnance Factory at Burghfield; and if he climbed on to my roof, he could probably see the missile silos at Greenham common. In my part of Berkshire, we need no lessons from anyone about the impact or the effect of living close to the nuclear deterrent. He replied as consummately as clever politicians do, that that was the first and last time he would ever be asked into a Tory MP’s bedroom.

The point is that the nuclear deterrent is my constituency’s largest employer, and it brings many advantages, not least to the supply chain of 275 local companies and 1,500 supply chain organisations nationally. Add to that its role in advising the Government on counter-terrorism; the effect it has on nuclear threat reduction, on forensics—not least in the recent Litvinenko inquiry—and on non-proliferation; its second-to-none apprenticeship scheme; and its academic collaboration with the Orion laser. None of that would matter one jot if the decision we were taking today was wrong. The decision we are taking today is right.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I have listened with great interest to what the hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) said. I have spoken tonight about our constituents and about future generations, but let us also talk about the concept of using nuclear weapons. There is a good, honest and decent concept, which goes back many generations and which I can respect, of disarmament and pacifism in this country. I happen to think that in this context it is wrong, but we can respect it. When people talk about using nuclear weapons, they need to understand the doctrine that governs them. Our nuclear deterrent has been used every single day of every single year for which it has been deployed. It does what it says on the tin: it deters.

I am sorry to say it, but no one believes that an independent Scotland would suddenly start to invest in Type 26 destroyers, fast jets and all the other paraphernalia
of a nation that somehow wants to engage in the world in the way that Britain does. SNP Members' sudden attraction to the idea of massive defence spending is complete nonsense.

Ian Blackford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Benyon: No, I will not give way.

The nature of regimes in a more dangerous world is what we need to consider today. Although we have reduced our arsenal of nuclear weapons by 50% in recent years—the Leader of the Opposition completely ignored the fact that we have reduced our arsenal so considerably—the number of states with nuclear weapons has increased and the number of tactical nuclear weapons in the world is now over 17,000.

On the question of cost, I would just state that all this—the £31 billion over 35 years, plus the contingency—translates to about 0.2% of total Government spending. That will be reduced if we take account of the advantage for the supply chain of developing this suite of replacement submarines.

I will finish by saying that we need to listen to our allies on this issue. We have an agreement with the French—the Lancaster House agreement—and we have a long-standing agreement with the United States. Our nuclear defence is networked into our other allies as well. We need to think about their response to what we are debating as much as about the future generations that we will protect through our decision tonight.

6.1 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Until three weeks ago, I anticipated that I would speak in this debate as Labour's shadow armed forces Minister, but today I do so from the Back Benches. Either way, however, I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for the work he did to ensure Labour's approach to this debate was evidence based.

In his capacity as chair of the PLP defence committee, he conducted an exhaustive series of seminars on the Vanguard renewal, with a wide body of contributors. We heard from the general secretary of CND, the Minister for Defence Procurement, two former Labour Secretaries of State for Defence, trade unions, firms responsible for the thousands of jobs that today hang in the balance, and academics and historians who placed the decision we face today in an appropriate global strategic and historical context.

I, too, have a historical context here. Back in the 1980s, my mother was a Greenham Common protester.

John Woodcock: Mine too.

Toby Perkins: That is something else we have in common. I believe that both my parents were members of CND. I do not think I ever had the badge, but as a 13-year-old I certainly made some of the arguments we heard from our Front Bench a few moments ago. As with much of the discourse in the Labour party now, we are having a retro debate that we thought had been settled three decades ago. We have previously fought general elections on a unilateralist platform. Some people surrounding the Labour party leader may think that winning elections is just the small bit that matters to political elites, but to most of us—and indeed to my constituents—it is pretty fundamental to delivering the change our society needs.

My instinct was that the policy on which we fought the previous election was the correct one, but I none the less approached the review with an open mind. I heard all the tried-and-tested arguments in opposition to Trident, but I have to say that the weight of evidence in support of the decision the Government are taking today was overwhelming.

I was told many things. I was told that once I got to meet senior military figures, I would learn that none of them really wanted this and all wanted the money to go elsewhere. That simply was not true. From a range of experienced and expert opinion, I heard time and again that our armed forces recognise the strategic importance of sending a powerful message to our adversaries, of the geopolitical role that a credible nuclear deterrent plays and of its importance to our relationship with our NATO allies.

In the past nine months, I have visited NATO with two previous shadow Secretaries of State for Defence. We met representatives from Estonia, Latvia, Poland and several other NATO allies. For those countries, the Russian threat is not a dinner table conversation, but a matter of chilling daily reality. My hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) was told how desperate they were for Britain to retain the nuclear deterrent and send a powerful signal to President Putin.

We were also told that it was too soon to make a decision, but Lord West made it clear to the PLP defence committee that, because of the existing extension to the lifetime of the Vanguard class of submarines, further delays to the programme would mean that we could no longer maintain a permanent and continuous posture.

As the case for not having Trident has fallen apart, the alternative options we have heard proposed have become ever more absurd. First, we had “Build the submarines, but don’t equip them with nuclear capability”, which would involve all the spending, but none of the strategic benefit. Secondly, we were told we could re-perform the exhaustive Trident alternatives review and have another five years of indecision to match the period provided by the coalition Government.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) told us that all his constituents do not want this. However, only 44% of his constituents voted for a party that wants to get rid of Trident, while 56% voted for parties committed to the retention of Trident, so that does not stand up to scrutiny in the way he suggests.

The most depressing exchange was with representatives of the GMB union in Barrow, when my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury suggested that they might like to make wind turbines instead. They politely but firmly informed her that they were involved in designing and producing one of the most complex pieces of technology on the face of the earth, and that wind turbines had already been invented.

The House is being asked today to take a difficult and a costly decision.
Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his speech. He will have heard, as I have done, the case that many people have put to Labour MPs—that they do not back unilaterism, but would prefer an alternative nuclear weapons platform. What consideration did he give to those points when he represented us on the Front Bench?

Toby Perkins: That is a very important point. In fact, the Government tried to come to precisely that conclusion on behalf of the Liberal Democrat allies in the previous Government. The truth of the matter is that having a ballistic missile system based on submarines is crucial to ensuring that it is undetectable by our adversaries and that it provides a genuine and creditable deterrent in relation to our adversaries’ missile defence systems.

Labour Members should have confidence that the world-class technology produced by the very best of British manufacturing, which benefits suppliers in almost every constituency in the land—including, I am proud to say, at Cathelco in Chesterfield—is delivering the minimum credible continuous deterrent that we can deliver. It will aid global security and be viewed with great gratitude not just by the workers whose livelihoods depend on it, but by partners who are nervously watching our adversaries’ every move. Labour Members should know that they are voting in accordance with the policy they were elected on and in support of working trade union members and our heroic armed forces personnel; that they are contributing towards global security; that backing Vanguard is in keeping with our internationalist principles; and that it is the right thing to do.

6.7 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I rise to support the motion, and I do so joylessly and with a heavy heart. Nobody can stand in a missile compartment of a ballistic submarine without a sense of terrible awe; our warheads have the capacity to destroy 40 million people. I know that everyone in the Chamber feels that responsibility extremely acutely, and that certainly goes for my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench and their predecessors.

I spent much of my 20-year naval career at the tail end of the cold war. The cold war is over, however, and one can say it was won. The cold war did not become a real war, in part because of the terrible weapons that we are discussing this afternoon. We must not be preparing to fight the last war. Right hon. and hon. Members throughout the House are right to say that tomorrow’s wars are likely to be asymmetric wars, hybrid wars, wars involving terrorism, or conflicts involving climate change that, as we sit here, we really cannot fully understand. However, simply because those threats exist, that does not mean that nuclear blackmail does not and will not exist.

I fully accept that there are shades of grey in this debate. I absolutely reject the absolutist positions taken by some commentators, and I fully understand and respect arguments in relation to opportunity costs, but we have to make a decision now. We have been here several times before. In 2006, under the Labour party, we conducted what was appropriately called a deep dive. In 2013, very largely thanks to the Liberal Democrats—it pains me to say so, but it is nevertheless true—we undertook an alternatives review and dealt with many of the issues involved. I have no doubt that we will discuss this afternoon the alternatives considered at that time.

In the time available, I would like to speak briefly about the two propositions of redundancy and reputation. Those are respectable arguments that deserve to be dealt with properly.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Before my hon. Friend speaks about those two crucial points, does he agree that the speech we have just heard from the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) was a most powerful argument, based on core beliefs that he has clearly thought about deeply and for a long time? It should be compelling for those of our constituents who are not clear about the party lines on this issue.

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is right, and the speech by the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) was also extremely powerful.

The redundancy proposition holds that advancing technology will make the continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent redundant. It is supposed—despite all evidence to the contrary—that unmanned underwater vessels will appear and render our oceans transparent, but that is pure supposition. We cannot approach our defence on the basis of what might happen in the future. History is usually a guide in these matters, and this year we mark the centenary of the introduction of tanks into the battle space. We could have said then, “We must not develop this technology because of the possibility of sticky bombs and tank traps”, but we did not.

Mrs Moon: One lesson from history must be from Nye Bevan, who said as Foreign Secretary that he should not be sent “naked into the conference chamber”.

What sort of emperor in new clothing would go into a conference chamber with President Putin, for example, and say, “I don’t have nuclear weapons—well, I have some nuclear-powered subs, but there are no weapons on them”?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Lady is right. I am enjoying the consensual nature of this debate—it is the House of Commons at its very best. In 1929, J. F. C. Fuller said that tanks would make infantry redundant. In a sense he was right, but his timeframe was completely wrong, and the infantry was adapted rather than abolished. The imminent end of manned fighters was confidently predicted in a 1957 Government White Paper. The important point, which the hon. Lady was trying to make, is that we cannot base our defence on what we imagine might happen.

The threat of cyber and of unmanned underwater vessels should invigorate our countermeasures and our attempts to detect and potentially disrupt aggressors. Nevertheless, just as the Lightning II joint strike fighter may have only half a life before it is rendered obsolescent, we must be open to the possibility that the Successor submarine may at some point over its long life be made obsolete. However, I do not think that a sufficient argument to deploy against the decision we will make today.
The second proposition that I want to touch on is that of reputation theory. The argument is that unilateralism will in some way raise our standing internationally, but that is hopelessly naive. Try saying that to people in Ukraine; try waving the Budapest memo at them. Many will say that had Ukraine not given up its share of the USSR’s nuclear armamentarium—about a third of it—when it became independent, its territory would now be assured and it would not have been invaded by Russia. I do not want to take that argument too far, because others will make counter arguments about the wisdom of Ukraine having nuclear weapons—personally, I am pleased it does not—but from the perspective of a state that is trying to face down an aggressor, that is a powerful argument.

Some say that if we cut our nuclear arsenal others will follow, but there is no evidence to suggest that that is the case. We have cut our arsenal dramatically in recent years, yet other states have increased theirs.

Finally, in this atmosphere of Brexit, when we are re-forging our links with other international organisations and operating in an outward-facing way that I find refreshing, we must think about our permanent membership of the UN Security Council. That membership is contingent on this country offering something. It may pain some right hon. and hon. Members to ponder this, but in large part our membership of that body is down to our continued possession of this terrible weapon.

6.15 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I rise to support the motion. There are those who do not agree with my position, including in my own party, and I do not disagree that they have the right to hold their position, I respect their position; I do not question their motives, and I believe that people can argue from an alternative position to mine. Unfortunately, respect is something of a rarity in our political landscape at the moment, and it saddens me to say that that includes people in my own party.

Our independent nuclear deterrent has its origins in the great radical and reforming 1945 Labour Government. Political giants of my party took the decision that the UK should develop its own nuclear weapon. They saw that as being vital for our nation’s security against the rising threat from the Soviet bloc and the uncertain world they faced. That commitment to our national security, while pursuing a policy of outward-looking international engagement, has been a cornerstone of Labour’s position, and it is universally shared by our supporters.

Today we face an uncertain world, and some of the threats that we face are the same as those faced by our forebears in 1945. Those threats include state-on-state conflict and a resurgent Russia that is now wedded not to communist ideology and doctrine but to a crude nationalism that has no respect for international boundaries or laws. Russia has a clear path to increasing its military spending and its nuclear arsenal, and it has a doctrine of spheres of influence reminiscent of the 1940s. We also face threats such as Islamic terrorism, global warming and economic uncertainty. Is there one silver bullet to resolve all those threats? No, there is not, but the retention of our nuclear deterrent is vital to resist the threat of a resurgent Russia that is developing its nuclear weapons.

The Leader of the Opposition has portrayed today the uncertainty about the Labour party position. In the last Parliament I was asked by the then Leader of the Opposition to conduct a review of our deterrent. We met 28 stakeholders from all sides of the debate—including my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who was then chair of Labour CND—and that resulted in a report of more than 35,000 words. The report built on the work of the Defence Committee, the Labour Government’s 2006 White Paper and the Trident alternatives review. All the evidence that was taken came to the conclusion that replacing our Vanguard-class submarines was the only alternative. That report fed into our policy review and was adopted at our 2014 conference. That is the policy that I stood under, as did every other Labour candidate, including my right hon. Friend.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): If time permits, I hope that my hon. Friend will mention an issue that affects a lot of my constituents in North Staffordshire. A lot of our young people join the military and put their lives on the line for this country. How can we stand here in this Chamber knowing that we are putting their lives on the line, but not giving them the back-up of a nuclear deterrent?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend is saying that the Labour tradition is to support our armed forces, and I totally agree. The manifesto that I and the Leader of the Opposition stood on was also voted on, and 9.3 million members of the electorate supported it. The argument in tonight’s motion is identical to what was in that manifesto. It is ironic that we are having a free vote, since my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) put that argument to the Leader of the Opposition in 2015 and it resulted in her removal from the Labour Front Bench. Unfortunately I, too, had no option but to resign.

The alternatives review by my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) has been going on for the past seven months. Much airtime has been given to it, but not a single word has yet been published. It is a bit like the mythical unicorn—people believe it exists, but it has never actually been sighted.

The important point about our deterrent is security, but we cannot forget about the jobs it brings. I am proud to support both Unite and GMB members who work in the industry. They are professional, skilled and dedicated in their work. I challenge those who vote against the motion tonight to look those workers directly in the eye and tell them what the alternatives are for their communities—not empty promises of jobs tomorrow or in the future, but what will happen now.

My party has a proud track record in government on disarmament, to which I am committed, and I am glad the motion contains a commitment to multilateral nuclear disarmament. More important for our nation at this time, however, is that walking away from our commitments to our NATO partners would be a fundamental mistake. It would indicate that we were withdrawing from the world, and we cannot afford to do that. Voting for the motion is in the long tradition of my party, which believes in the security of our nation. My party is committed to a peaceful and outward-looking world,
and to ensuring that what we do in this House makes a difference and improves people's lives. That cannot be done unless we have security.

6.21 pm

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to contribute to the debate.

I represent the great city of Plymouth, where we have a long and proud naval history. Plymouth is where the Vanguard-class submarines are repaired and refitted. I will not make an overly lengthy contribution today, but I would like to give my experience of the representations made in my constituency, where the Trident programme plays such a significant role in our local economy. Representatives of Plymouth, sent here to represent our famous naval city, have always taken very seriously our twin responsibilities—to the nation's security and to the employment prospects of those who have loyally maintained, and continue to maintain, the submarines that carry Trident missiles.

The Vanguard submarines are repaired and refitted at the Devonport dockyard in Plymouth. For me and my colleagues who represent Plymouth, they are a vital source of employment for thousands, as they are for other Members with naval bases in their constituencies. That source is not as easily replaced as some might think, and my colleagues' view and mine is that it would be simply a gamble too far. We live in a desperately unstable world. Last weekend was perhaps the most unstable for years. That should not in itself be an argument for maintaining our Trident programme, but it illustrates how we simply cannot predict events beyond next week, let alone far in the future.

National security is fundamental to delivering all that we come into politics to deliver—a fairer society, social justice and opportunities for all. Without it, none of the causes that I know I share with many Opposition Members would be achievable. The Government have a responsibility to put the security of the nation and its people first and foremost. We need to maintain our ultimate deterrent, because we simply do not know what the future holds.

I am not deaf to those concerned about the costs and risks of maintaining the fleet in Plymouth. There is an active community of people who write to me often about that issue. As with any other contentious issue, I have sought to understand the arguments. I speak to those who agree with me and, more importantly, to those who disagree with me. On this issue, however, I am single-mindedly sure: we must maintain our commitment to this programme and replace the Vanguard-class submarines with the new Successor class. Strategically, we cannot and should not wear the risk that comes with abandoning our continuous at-sea deterrence, and the message that that would send to our NATO allies.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman represents Plymouth. There has been a lot of debate about relocating Trident to Plymouth. Would he support that move?

Johnny Mercer: Absolutely, I would support that move. I would love to have all the jobs that would come with that. We would be more than happy to have it and to build on our naval heritage in that way.

Dr Murrison: I assure my hon. Friend that all of us who represent constituencies in the south-west would be more than delighted if the work was transferred from Scotland to the south-west, in the event that our deterrent was to move.

Johnny Mercer: Absolutely. We are proud of our naval heritage in the south-west—we are very proud of the people we support, our servicemen and servicewomen, and we would be delighted to make their lives easier by providing the facilities the south-west affords. Locally, the deterrent means thousands of jobs in Plymouth and a continuance of the Plymouth naval tradition that makes so many of us so proud. It is part of the fabric of our city. To lose that would be disastrous for the communities I am here to represent.

Let us not abstain tonight. Let us not play to our home crowd. Let us stand up for Britain's place in the world and renew our nuclear deterrent. I say to Opposition Members—not to Scottish National party Members, because I have been struck by their rather childlike interventions about Libya and Iraq, which are totally separate issues—that I know many of my friends on the Labour Benches are of a similar mind to me on this issue. To those who are not, I say that I do not believe they love the country less in any way than those who support the motion. However, all the things we come into politics for are nothing without national security, and that must come first. To deliver the causes that I know are so dear to them and to me, we must renew our nuclear deterrent.

All steps must be taken to ensure the safety of this country's people. The highly skilled engineering jobs I have talked about cannot be risked. Now, with everything that is going on—not just last weekend, but in the past year—is not the time to lower our guard. The Prime Minister mentioned North Korea. Can we really lose our nuclear weapons at this time? In an ideal world, I agree that it would be great not to have nuclear weapons, but how do we disinvest something that has been invented? The Government must base their decisions on the reality they face; others have the luxury to do otherwise. Trident remains the ultimate deterrent against an attack by those who would harm this country and our people, as it has been for 60 years. The point was made earlier that the Trident system is never used. It is used, every single day. A nuclear deterrent does what it says. The Government's first priority is to ensure the safety and security of the nation and its people, and that is why I will support the Government's motion tonight. I will be proud to walk through the Lobby with colleagues from across the House.

6.27 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As my right hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) said earlier, there exists in Scotland a broad consensus against Trident. Tonight, I expect 58 of Scotland's 59 Members of Parliament—98% of Scottish MPs—to vote against the motion. In doing so, we will be reflecting a consensus that exists in Scotland, where the Scottish
Government, the Scottish Parliament, the SNP, the Labour party in Scotland, the Scottish Green party, the Scottish TUC, great swathes of Scottish civil society and Scotland’s faith communities are all opposed to having nuclear weapons foisted upon us. Indeed, just last week the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic bishops of Scotland publicly reaffirmed their opposition to the UK possessing these weapons.

James Cartlidge: The SNP’s policy is for Scotland to be independent. If Scotland no longer had a nuclear deterrent, what would be the SNP’s strategy to defend Scotland in the event on an existential threat to the United Kingdom as a whole?

Brendan O’Hara: As an independent sovereign nation, we would act as every other independent sovereign nation in the world acts. The idea that Scotland is somehow incapable of defending itself as a part of the NATO alliance is absolutely bewildering and, if I may say so, unbelievably patronising. Despite what those on the Tory Benches like to think, Scotland has spoken and Scotland does not want these weapons of mass destruction.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): We have heard an awful lot about job losses in my hon. Friend’s constituency. Is that something that concerns him?

Brendan O’Hara: Job losses are a concern wherever they occur and whoever the Member is, but I can say that the SNP has never and will never advocate the closure of Faslane. As a conventional naval base, Faslane has a bright non-nuclear future as part of an independent Scotland and I look forward to representing it as such. In the decade since the Government gave over time to debate Trident, the world has changed almost beyond recognition. The threats emerging from this rapidly changing world should force us to re-examine everything we once took for granted. We have heard often this afternoon that the world is a far more dangerous place than ever before. Just as the threats we face are far more complex and nuanced, so our response should be too, but sadly the Government have singularly failed to address that today.

Rushing to arm ourselves with even bigger submarines carrying even more devastating nuclear weapons does not reflect the reality spelled out in last year’s SDSR. Just nine months ago, the SDSR laid out what the Government regarded as tier 1 threats facing the country. As defined by the Government, they were: international terrorism, cyber-attack, hybrid warfare and natural disaster. Nuclear attack by a foreign power was not regarded as a tier 1 threat, yet today we are told that we cannot sleep safely in our beds unless the green light is given to spend almost £200,000 million—as the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) tells us—on a renewal programme.

The world, and the threats we face, are changing, and the UK faces the problem of how to deal with this new world. The choices we make now will determine what we can do in the future, so let us be absolutely clear: as much as we would like to, we cannot do everything. This is about stark choices, and those choices have got an awful lot harder for the proponents of Trident since the Brexit vote and the prospect of our leaving the EU, especially given the recent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies which states that the UK’s GDP will reduce by up to 3.5%, resulting in the infamous black hole in the public finances of up to £40 billion by 2020. Surely the House has to know what that means for defence procurement before we sign a blank cheque for Trident.

Surely we are entitled to ask, before sanctioning £200,000 million for nuclear weapons, what the effect will be for our conventional forces. Will the Secretary of State tell us where the axe will fall in order that we might secure Trident? Will the Type 26 frigates be delayed yet again and their number further reduced? Is the Apache helicopter programme at risk? Will the F-35 programme be scaled back? Or will the axe once again fall on our already hard-pressed service personnel? It is not outrageous for the House, which is being asked to write a blank cheque, to ask for a full analysis of the cost of Brexit and the effect that the contraction of the UK economy will have on defence procurement.

We are being asked to buy four submarines, whose unique capability, we are told, is that they cannot be detected by hostile forces and therefore can move freely and undisturbed. That might well be the case today—I am sure they can—but can we honestly say that in 16 years, after we have spent £200,000 million, that unique capability will still exist? Every day, highly paid, highly intelligent people go to work in laboratories across Russia, China and the USA with the express intention of making the big missile submarine detectable and therefore useless. In all probability, by the time these new boats come into service, they will be obsolete and as difficult to detect as a white-hulled cruise ship is today.

There is no moral, economic or military case for possession of these weapons, and I will join my 57 colleagues from Scotland in voting against the motion. Despite Scotland’s overwhelming rejection of Trident, however, sadly I expect the motion to carry and Scotland to find itself in the intolerable position of having weapons of mass destruction that we do not want foisted upon us by a Government we did not elect. It is an intolerable situation, and I question how much longer it can continue.

6.34 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in a debate on one of the most essential issues that the House could discuss. This is not about a variation in tax policy that could be reversed or a change in social norms that will evolve with time; it is about the ultimate security of our nation in the coming century. This is not a time for games or minor interventions on questions of no relevance. It is time for a debate about the security of our state, the strategy of the UK and her place in the world.

I am proud to stand here, on the Conservative Benches, and look across at the Labour Benches and know that there are many people who value the UK—our freedom, our sovereignty, our liberty, our right to self-determination. I understand that they require an ultimate guarantee. We all know the truly horrific nature of these weapons, but it is through their horror and threat that they work. If they were not so horrific or terrible, the deterrent would not be so complete. We have seen time and again that the awfulness of weaponry demands a graduated
response. When we see the initial use of force, we see the armaments of the infantryman and the armaments of small aircraft. We have seen this in Europe in the past century—even in the years since the second world war: we have seen Kosovo, we have seen Ukraine, we have seen threats to our close allies in Estonia.

We see these things, however, because the weapons used are controllable and measurable; they are, to use that awful phrase, small arms. However, the capability and purpose of the nuclear deterrent lies in its not being so measurable or controllable. It is truly horrific; and in that, it works. It works not because of its first-strike capability—any fool can have a first-strike capability—but in the second strike. It works not as a weapon of aggression but only as a post mortem weapon. It is a weapon that assures your enemy that, no matter what they have done to you, you can still respond. It is the ultimate guarantee of our sovereignty and security.

It is astonishing that, having just had a referendum in which we discussed the sovereignty and control of our nation, some people are looking to hand it over and diminish it, even though we know what counts. I therefore welcome what the Prime Minister said today. When asked if she would consider using the weapon, she said yes. She gave the clarity that deterrence requires and showed the strength that will make her a fine Prime Minister. It is that strength and clarity, around the most horrific of all weapons systems, that will maintain our sovereignty and freedom.

I have heard people ask today about the UK’s place in the world. Our place is at the top table, guaranteeing the international order and the freedoms and liberties of our friends. When I hear talk of unilateral disarmament and appeasement, I hear talk not of honour and morality but of dishonour and immorality. It is to abandon our position and our friends to say that dictators and despots should keep their weapons of destruction and nuclear power but that democrats should abandon the ability to defend themselves and their friends. That is unacceptable. The spectrum of defence, from the infantryman to the nuclear missile, is intertwined, is one, is blended. To unpick or divide is to disarm even the infantryman at the front. It is wrong, therefore, to talk of reducing spend on nuclear weapons and a lie to say that the money would be better spent on conventional weapons.

6.39 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). I am proud to stand here as someone who upholds a position that the Labour party has always stood for—proud to recognise our international responsibilities and proud to recognise that a strong defence is essential to our country.

There is no Member in this Chamber who does not wish to rid the world of nuclear weapons or who believes that they have a superior morality to anyone else, but people disagree about how to pursue the goal that we all share of reducing the number of nuclear weapons and, if that is not possible, of having a world completely free of nuclear weapons. We can make a choice to disarm unilaterally or multilaterally, but we live in a more uncertain world.

Who would have predicted a few years ago the rise of Daesh; who would have predicted what the Russians have done in eastern Ukraine or indeed in Crimea? As far as I can see, in reading back to that time, nobody foresaw those events. Given that we are trying to predict what might happen over the next 40 or 50 years, why would any Government say that they would give up the ultimate insurance policy and security for our nation in those circumstances? I do not believe that the Government should do that. I think that the Prime Minister was right to argue as she did, and I view the motion before us today as reasonable and responsible.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Does not the hon. Gentleman accept that the example he cites—the rise of Daesh—shows the sheer absurdity of spending money on this? In a way, we are investing in cavalry after the onset of the machine gun.

Vernon Coaker: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has asked that question. Having set out the reason for the uncertainty of the future we face, I want in my remaining minutes to dispel some of the myths that are mentioned when nuclear weapons are debated. Nobody here believes that nuclear weapons will in any circumstances deter the sort of attacks—the awful attacks, as we all accept—that we have seen on the London underground or in Nice, for example. Of course not. Nuclear weapons are not meant to deal with that; we have conventional weapons, counter-terrorism specialists and so forth to deal with those terrorist outrages. Nuclear weapons are there to deal with the sort of inter-state actors we might see in Russia, China, North Korea or other rogue states that we cannot predict at the present time. That is what nuclear weapons are for—not for the situation articulated by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson).

Brendan O’Hara: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we do not have a bottomless pit or an inexhaustible supply of money, which means that choices have to be made? We are being asked to write a blank cheque for Trident this evening. At what point does Trident become too much for the hon. Gentleman?

Vernon Coaker: That is a legitimate point and we have to make a legitimate choice. I support the Government’s choice because in an uncertain world as we look forward, it is a price worth paying for the defence and security of our nation. The hon. Gentleman and I know each other, so I know he is reading this stuff in a document that says that if we make an assumption that this will use about 6% of the defence budget between 2031 and 2060, Trident will cost £17.4 billion. If we make the assumptions made by the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), we can get to £179 billion. If we make the assumptions that the hon. Gentleman makes, we can get to another figure. The figures are all in there, and I am saying yes, this is a cost worth paying and something worth doing because it provides security for our nation.

Let me now challenge the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara). I have been reading the Scottish National party’s debate of a few years ago—in October 2012, I believe. Members of the Scottish Parliament resigned because of the ludicrous position into which the SNP had got itself. The Defence Secretary should
make more of this point. The ludicrous situation is that the SNP is not prepared to accept British nuclear weapons, but it will accept the American nuclear umbrella in NATO. That is the sort of thing we get from SNP Members and they need to answer it. It is no wonder that some MSPs resigned when they realised that that policy was totally and utterly contradictory. Let them explain that to the Scottish people—that they will withdraw Trident, but want to remain part of NATO.

Joanna Cherry: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to explain SNP policy. Is he not aware that the majority of NATO members do not have an independent nuclear deterrent? Is he aware of that?

Vernon Coaker: Of course I am aware of it. Is the hon. and learned Lady aware of the fact that NATO has something called the nuclear planning group, and that every single person in NATO has to be a member of that group and they have to agree to certain things, including the use of nuclear weapons in certain circumstances by the Americans? Is the hon. and learned Lady aware of that?

Joanna Cherry rose—

Vernon Coaker: I cannot give way any more.

Jobs are, of course, another crucial aspect. Tens of thousands of jobs across this country are dependent on the nuclear deterrent and the continuation of this programme. Although the continuation cannot be based solely on jobs, they are an important consideration—whether the jobs be in Scotland, Plymouth or indeed elsewhere.

I very much support the motion. It is consistent with the traditions of the Labour party, which has always been proud to defend our country, proud to recognise our international obligations and proud to stand up against those who have imposed tyranny on the rest of us. We must recognise the responsibilities we have as a senior member of NATO and a senior member of the Security Council of the UN. That comes with obligations and responsibilities. This Labour party—or part of it, anyway—accepts those responsibilities and will vote for the motion.

6.47 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who has made not only a passionate speech, but an extremely well informed and able speech that puts very well the case for maintaining our independent nuclear deterrent. It is striking that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister should choose this debate as the first occasion on which to appear at the Dispatch Box as Prime Minister to reinforce her personal will and determination to stand up for this country, to stand up for global peace and security and to demonstrate her personal resolve to protect the values that our country represents around the world.

It is also striking that her very first act as Prime Minister was to pay respect to Scotland and the Scottish Executive by visiting the First Minister at the end of last week. If I may, I would like to address the Scottish dimension to the debate. The SNP is clearly represented in this House by many sincere unilateralists. No one need doubt their sincerity, but I very much doubt whether their views are as representative of Scottish opinion as they claim.

A recent poll showed a majority in Scotland in favour of maintaining the nuclear deterrent. [ Interruption. ] SNP Members shake their heads, and they are entitled to do so—I would expect them to—but I put it to them that there are many reasons why the SNP is ascendant in Scottish politics, and I do not think that their defence policy is one of them. I think they would still be doing well in Scotland if they were in favour of maintaining the Trident nuclear deterrent. I do not think that the case of Trident renewal was uppermost in voters’ minds in Scotland at the time of the last general election or the Scottish election.

Brendan O’Hara rose—

Joanna Cherry rose—

Mr Jenkin: I appreciate that it was in their manifesto, but what of the bit of hypocrisy highlighted so ably by the hon. Member for Gedling? On the one hand, they reject the whole notion of nuclear defence, yet they want an independent Scotland to join NATO, which is a nuclear alliance, and benefit from the shelter that other countries are prepared to provide them with as part of the nuclear umbrella.

Brendan O’Hara: Perhaps, given his in-depth knowledge of Scottish politics, the hon. Gentleman can explain my presence in the Chamber today as the Member of Parliament for Argyll and Bute, a constituency that includes both Faslane and Coulport. Perhaps he can explain why the people of Faslane, Coulport and the rest of Argyll and Bute chose me when I stood explicitly on an anti-Trident ticket, if it is such a terrible and divisive vote-loser.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I want to fit everyone in, and there are a great many SNP voices to be heard a little later. Long interventions mean that other Members do not have a chance to speak, and we do not want that to happen.

Mr Jenkin: I will move on to the next point, Mr Deputy Speaker.

My right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary is fond of describing Trident as an insurance policy, but I counsel him to use that phrase sparingly, because the maintenance of our nuclear deterrent is so much more than just an insurance policy. It is not a premium. That description “de-emphasises” the way in which the deterrent is continuously used, shaping our global security environment, and expressing the character of our country and our national will and resolve. It does not sufficiently emphasise its deterrent quality, which is not to deter terrorism or much lower forms of combat.

The invention of nuclear weapons has undoubtedly ended large-scale state-on-state warfare, and I would even be so bold as to suggest that were we to disinvest, we would be inviting the resumption of such warfare. I am not sure that human nature miraculously changed after 1945, but something in the global strategic environment certainly did, and we no longer see that large-scale state-on-state warfare.
 Members of the Scottish National party have made much of the cost of Trident today, but let me ask them this question: how cheap would it need to be before they regarded it as good value for money? I do not think that is an argument with which they are prepared to engage. They are against nuclear weapons whatever the cost, and they are perfectly sincere about that, so I invite them to stop bellyaching about the cost, because it is an irrelevant part of their argument.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the use of huge figures in isolation is at best unhelpful and at worst misleading? When applied across a 35-year time horizon, such massive figures would, in fact, be dwarfed by our international aid budget.

Mr Jenkin: My hon. Friend is right. The cost of maintaining the nuclear deterrent on a year-on-year basis is much less than our aid budget. A year’s cost of the Trident missile submarine system is the equivalent of one week’s spending on the national health service. It is also about a quarter of our net contribution to the European Union, and I look forward to saving that cost.

At about 6% of the overall defence budget and about 2% of GDP, this weapons system represents extraordinarily good-value expenditure, given that it deters large-scale state-on-state warfare. It is a matter of great pride that our country has inherited this role, and, precisely because we do not want every NATO country or every democracy to have nuclear weapons, it is our duty as global citizens to retain the system, contributing, as we do, to the global security and safety of the world.

Joanna Cherry: Before the hon. Gentleman sits down, would he like to reconsider his comment that we were hypocrites because we did not want an independent nuclear deterrent, but did want to be in NATO? Does he realise that he was calling the majority of the United Kingdom’s allies in NATO hypocrites?

Mr Jenkin: As was explained so ably by the hon. Member for Gedling, if a country is a member of NATO, it is a member of the NATO nuclear group. It is involved in the planning of deployment of nuclear weapons, regardless of whether they are its own weapons. Why would Scotland, under the Scottish National party, be so reluctant to play such a vital role in the global security of the country? I respect the fact that SNP members have personal scruples about nuclear weapons, and they are entitled to those scruples. I am merely arguing that were the Scottish people truly to vote on that issue and that issue alone, they might well find that their view was not representative of the aspiration of the true majority of Scots.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): Some of the speeches that we have heard today have given me the feeling that the cold war is still going on, and “Come On Eileen” should be number one in the charts. At the other extreme, it has seemed that we are sitting here waiting for Mars to attack. A number of the arguments have struck me as slightly bizarre. However, this is a hugely serious issue.

We hear a great deal about the cost and the finances, but let us take a step back from that. Let us consider the worst-case scenario. Nuclear weapons have been fired in this country. There has been an attack. It has gone off. Are we really saying that our very first action would be the ultimate act of vengeance—that we would fire a nuclear weapon at those who had attacked us?

Alberto Costa: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Owen Thompson: No.

It is absolutely beyond belief that, at a time of national tragedy, the first thing that we would want to do would be to strike out.

Alberto Costa: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Owen Thompson: No. I think we have heard enough from the hon. Gentleman.

We need to think about how we actually present ourselves as a country. We cannot simply sit here saying, “Vengeance is the answer to all the problems that we face.” Some call it deterrence, but to me it is vengeance. We would be carrying out a revenge attack.

Earlier today, my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) asked the Prime Minister whether she would fire, and kill hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women and children. Let us consider that question, because it is the question that we should be considering. That is what these weapons do.

Alberto Costa: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Cartlidge: rise—

Owen Thompson: I will not take interventions. I am keen to make my speech as quickly as possible, because a number of other Members wish to speak.

Do we genuinely want to renew this weapon of vengeance? That is what the debate boils down to. We are talking about rogue states. We are talking about situations that we cannot yet begin to comprehend. The threats that the country currently faces are not posed by states with nuclear weapons; they are posed by terrorist attacks and cyber-attacks. Nuclear weapons are not the answer to those problems.

Let me take this opportunity to pay tribute to the many members of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and Scottish CND who have come from all over the country to lobby us. They came to Parliament last week, there were events throughout the country over the weekend, and more came here today. Some Members will know that last year I presented a ten-minute rule Bill on the nuclear convoys that regularly travel through my constituency. Sadly, the Bill ran out of parliamentary time and could not be given a Second Reading, but to me the answer seems simple. If we do not have the nuclear weapons, we do not need the nuclear convoys, and we can reduce the risk to those in our communities.

Let me end with a thought for Members to ponder. At the weekend, a friend said to me that if 50 nuclear warheads were set off—which is not impossible; we certainly have that capability—the result would be worldwide famine. That is the reality of the weapons that we are dealing with. There can be no place for them
in the world in which we live today. It is time for the country to take a lead, to make a stand, and to say, “We are taking the first step.” By doing that, it could genuinely make the other countries follow its lead, and we could get rid of nuclear weapons throughout the world.

6.58 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We have been debating the issue of whether we should have an independent nuclear deterrent for 70 years. I suppose Ernest Bevin summed it up well. We have already heard the quotation about walking naked into the conference chamber, but Bevin said—only he could speak like this:

“We’ve got to have this thing over here, whatever it costs. We’ve got to have the Union Jack on top of it.”

Like all of us, I have thought about this issue for many years, and, like most people, I have reluctantly concluded that we must have an independent nuclear deterrent. However, the debate is not just about whether or not we have an independent nuclear deterrent. I was campaigning with my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) 30 years ago in the Coalition for Peace through Security. The argument was about the existence of the independent nuclear deterrent, and we were supporting Michael Heseltine against unilateralists, particularly in the Labour party.

This is a serious debate in which we have to ask what sort of independent nuclear deterrent we want. I think it is our general conclusion that an independent nuclear deterrent based on submarines is the only viable form of a deterrent because it is the most undetectable given modern technology. I have no ideological qualms with either an independent nuclear deterrent or one based on submarines, but those who argue in favour of Trident have to keep making the case, because during the cold war the threat was clear and known, and an independent nuclear deterrent based on ballistic missiles designed to penetrate Moscow defences made a great deal of sense; we knew who would be striking us, and we knew who to strike back against, and this mutuality of awareness to penetrate Moscow defences made a great deal of sense; we knew who would be striking us, and we knew who to strike back against, and this mutuality of awareness was what kept the cold war cold. Those who argue against a nuclear deterrent have to meet this fact of history: the existence of nuclear weapons kept the cold war cold.

Dr Julian Lewis: To support what my hon. Friend has just said, if there had not been many conflicts going on in other parts of the world where the nuclear balance of terror did not apply during the cold war, it would be possible to argue that nuclear deterrence had played no part, but the fact is that communist regimes—proxy clients, as it were, for the superpowers—were fighting each other all over the globe. The one area where communism and capitalism did not fight each other was in Europe, because that is where the balance of power and the balance of terror was doing its work.

Sir Edward Leigh: Of course I agree with that; I think that is a fact of history that is generally recognised. We have heard many powerful speeches—in particular those by the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat)—making the case for the independent nuclear deterrent, but I say to my colleagues who made those powerful speeches that, fair enough, we are going to have an independent nuclear deterrent, but it is not good enough to say that the cost is not an issue. I am looking at this purely as a longstanding member of the Public Accounts Committee, and I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) that a total cost of £31 billion plus a contingency of £10.6 billion plus an ongoing cost of 6% of the defence budget is a lot of money, and we must constantly probe the Government, question them and ask whether we are getting good value for money. I accept the arguments and I have read the reports, and I know all the alternatives have problems, but we simply cannot give a blank cheque to the military-industrial complex; we cannot, as good parliamentarians concerned with good value for money, stop questioning British Aerospace and other providers all over the country on whether they are providing good value for money.

The cross-party Trident commission talked about three possible threats: the re-emergence of a cold war-style scenario; an emerging new nuclear power engaging in strategic competition with the UK; or a rogue state or terrorist group engaging in an asymmetric attack against the UK. The commission found that there were questions about whether this particular system—which is what I am talking about; I am not talking about arguments in favour of an independent nuclear deterrent—would be viable against these threats, so we must require the Secretary of State and the MOD to go on answering these questions.

I am probably not making myself popular with Members on either side of the House who have very strong views, but when I came to this place one of the first ways I irritated a sitting Prime Minister—Mrs Thatcher—was to team up with David Heathcoat-Amory and question whether we needed a ballistic missile system and whether Cruise missiles would not be a viable alternative. I know that those who sit on the Defence Committee, who will know much more about defence, have dismissed this, but in recent years the American Government have converted four of their ballistic-missile-carrying submarines into submarines that carry Cruise missiles.

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech on the cost, and he is absolutely right of course that we must keep costs under review and make sure that BAE and others deliver on time and on budget, but on the question of Cruise missiles, is there not a danger that we have coming an independent nuclear deterrent? Would it be viable against these threats, so we must require the Secretary of State and the MOD to go on answering these questions.

I am probably not making myself popular with Members on either side of the House who have very strong views, but when I came to this place one of the first ways I irritated a sitting Prime Minister—Mrs Thatcher—was to team up with David Heathcoat-Amory and question whether we needed a ballistic missile system and whether Cruise missiles would not be a viable alternative. I know that those who sit on the Defence Committee, who will know much more about defence, have dismissed this, but in recent years the American Government have converted four of their ballistic-missile-carrying submarines into submarines that carry Cruise missiles.

Sir Edward Leigh: Of course I agree with that; I think that is a fact of history that is generally recognised. We have heard many powerful speeches—in particular those by the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat)—making the case for the independent nuclear deterrent, but I say to my colleagues who made those powerful speeches that, fair enough, we are going to have an independent nuclear deterrent, but it is not good enough to say that the cost is not an issue. I am looking at this purely as a longstanding member of the Public Accounts Committee, and I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) that a total cost of £31 billion plus a contingency of £10.6 billion plus an ongoing cost of 6% of the defence budget is a lot of money, and we must constantly probe the Government, question them and ask whether we are getting good value for money. I accept the arguments and I have read the reports, and I know all the alternatives have problems, but we simply cannot give a blank cheque to the military-industrial complex; we cannot, as good parliamentarians concerned with good value for money, stop questioning British Aerospace and other providers all over the country on whether they are providing good value for money.
massive power designed to penetrate hugely powerful defences around Moscow, because that is not the threat we face today from either low-grade rogue states or terrorist movements.

I will be voting with the Government tonight, but I will not be handing them a blank cheque. I will be continuing to ask for value for money, and I believe every Member of the House should do the same.

Mr Roger Godsiff: I have debated these issues with the right hon. Gentleman on a number of occasions and I respect what he says, but I just do not agree with him.

The second argument put forward is that if the UK did not have nuclear weapons, it would, somehow, lose its place on the UN Security Council. That is nonsense, because when the Security Council was formed only one of the five permanent members had nuclear weapons—America. If it is now argued that to be a member of the UN Security Council, one has to have nuclear weapons, countries such as Japan, Germany and Brazil, which have legitimate claims to become part of an enlarged Security Council, would not be allowed to join, but three countries would be able to join—North Korea, Israel, and Pakistan, because they all have nuclear weapons.

The third argument is that nuclear weapons give us protection in an ever-changing world. This country, like all other developed countries, faces threats to its security from rogue states, international terrorist groups and groups within our own society who want to destroy it. As I have said many times, these threats are best met by our membership of NATO, the most successful mutual defence pact in history. It never attacked anybody between the time it was set up in 1948 and the end of the cold war. The tragedy of NATO has been that after the cold war—after the Berlin wall came down—it changed from being a mutual defence pact and became the world’s policeman, and that has caused enormous problems in its member countries. I believe that our security is best guaranteed by NATO, but I also believe that all the countries of NATO should contribute towards the cost of the nuclear umbrella; they should not get a free ride from America.

The way to deal with threats from terrorism, domestic or international, is by having a fully staffed and fully financed Security Service, by ensuring that the police have the money to do the job they need to do and by ensuring that our own conventional forces are given the tools for the job when they are sent into military conflicts on our behalf. The Chilcot report, which came out a week or so ago, graphically identified the deficiencies in materials and protections that our troops in Iraq faced. British soldiers should not go into any conflict on our behalf without the best equipment and protection we can give them.

Let me make this final point. We have witnessed terrible terrorist atrocities in the past year or so, and we witnessed the London bombings, but did our ownership of nuclear weapons prevent those things? We saw what happened in Paris and at the weekend in Nice, but did France’s nuclear deterrent prevent those things from happening? I am not convinced that spending a huge sum on renewing our nuclear deterrent, which I do not believe is independent, is justified; we should support NATO, back it and contribute to it, but I am not convinced that this is value for money. That is why I will vote against the motion this evening.

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7.14 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Margaret Thatcher and, I believe, Tony Benn used to say that there are no final victories in politics. Despite the storms of past controversies and the hard work required to win important arguments, some arguments need to be won again and
again, by each generation in turn, and so we are here again today. Some politicians talk as though a world without nuclear weapons were a possibility that could be realised, or at least seriously advanced, by our giving up our own unilaterally; as if the threat from nuclear armed states is not real, growing and still unanswered; and as if Britain should, in these times of all times—these post-Brexit times when we need our friends and allies more than ever—step back from our own defence and that of our allies. In essence, whether opponents say it or not, they suggest that we should piggy-back on our already stretched friends.

**Mr MacNeil:** The hon. Gentleman is a defender of the idea of a nuclear deterrent and the deterrent effect. Does he follow that logical train of thought and therefore stretch to agreeing with biological and chemical deterrents?

**Robert Jenrick:** Today, we are discussing the nuclear deterrent.

We have heard some curious arguments tonight. We have heard an argument that this is all about cost, but security is not about cost; security is the foundation of everything we hold dear. Without security, there is nothing. Without security, the costs are incalculable.

Nuclear deterrence has preserved the security and stability of this country for half a century. When I was a teenager, our national response to what appeared to be the end of the Soviet menace in the 1990s was to plan for a reduction in the size of our nuclear arsenal, without abandoning our commitment to an independent deterrent capability. That was then a sensible way to hedge against unpredictable future threats to this country’s vital interests. It was the right approach then and it is the right approach again today.

**Stephen Pound** (Ealing North) (Lab): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, like me, will have browsed through the business pages of *The Sunday Telegraph* yesterday. He will have noticed that there is some concern as to whether BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce can actually deliver the Successor programme on time and on budget. Does he think it would be wise for the Secretary of State to make contingency plans for possible failure in that direction?

**Robert Jenrick:** The hon. Gentleman makes a sensible point. As I understand it, the Secretary of State is committed to reporting annually on the progress of the project, and I hope that will give some comfort to the hon. Gentleman and to all of us who want to see it proceed successfully.

In the time I have available, let me summarise the arguments as I see them. First, deterrence is not simply for the cold war history books, as some have said this evening. Deterrence remains essential to prevent major wars from occurring between nation states, and to prevent our being coerced and blackmailed by threats from those who possess nuclear weapons. Deterrence also extends into war itself, ensuring—or attempting to ensure—that any war, whether large or small, is a limited war.

Secondly, we still live in a uniquely dangerous world, at risk of terrorist attack, as we heard from the Prime Minister earlier. We are also at risk and uncertain in terms of nation states and other major powers around the world, as other hon. Members have said. A couple of days ago, I saw on television the dignified face of Marina Litvinenko, as she stood on College Green, outside this building. She is a living testament to the danger and unpredictability of the regime in Russia.

We have seen further evidence of the growing long-term instability in Asia with the escalation of the South China sea dispute. That is surely one of the disputes that will mark out our generation and beyond, and which in turn will encourage the United States to pivot its attention and resources further towards the Pacific and away from Europe’s security. In late June, North Korea succeeded in launching a home-grown intermediate-range ballistic missile, which flew a distance of 250 miles to the Sea of Japan after five previous failed attempts. And let us not forget that it is little over a year since the signing of Iran’s nuclear deal, which I suspect will only delay the prospect of that country’s pursuit of nuclear weapons. Hon. Members might not be aware that Iran celebrated the first anniversary of the signing of that deal by firing a long-range ballistic missile using North Korean technology.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Surely the poisoning of Litvinenko and the annexation of Crimea happened despite our having nuclear weapons, so what exactly have they prevented?

**Robert Jenrick:** The point that I am making is that we cannot predict the future. We only have to look at the events of recent days and weeks to see the incredible unpredictability of this world. Most Members, myself included, could not have predicted the events of the last three weeks and we certainly cannot predict the events of the next three or four decades.

**Alex Chalk:** On the subject of Russia’s actions, would not the annexation of territory on our continent have been unimaginable two years ago? This just goes to show that we need to be prepared for things that are completely beyond our expectations.

**Robert Jenrick:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. The past is a poor predictor of the future. Looking back at our own history, we can say that we are not good at predicting the future.

Thirdly, as the Prime Minister has said, we cannot outsource our security—or rather, we can, but we take a grave risk if we do so. In the early post-cold war period, the willingness of the United States to stand with its allies—

**Mr MacNeil:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way in the last 10 seconds of his speech. Is he aware of the book by Peter Oborne in which the author tells of the Iranian leadership describing nuclear weapons as “haram”?

**Robert Jenrick** rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many people still wish to speak and that there is not very much time left. I now have to reduce the time limit to four minutes.
Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): When I sit in the House of Commons, I talk to many Members who support Trident. I can tell them that those weapons can kill 100 million people, but they know that. I can tell them that watersheds will be poisoned, crops will fail and many people will die from famine, pestilence and plague, but they know that. I can tell them that weapons of mass destruction have not stopped wars across the globe, but they know that. I can tell them that WMD are no protection from terrorism or cybercrime, but they know that. I can tell them that the £179 billion could be spent on health, education, housing, transport and social welfare, but they know that. The difference between us is that they believe that WMD are a deterrent and that their existence has kept us safe. Let us look at those claims.

In the lead-up to today’s debate, the Henry Jackson Society was kind enough to send me a copy of its report, “Foreign Nuclear Developments: A Gathering Storm”. A better title would be “Be afraid: be very afraid”. The report makes it clear that it would be foolhardy of the UK to give up its nuclear weapons because North Korea, Russia, China and Iran either have nuclear weapons or are actively pursuing them.

Alberto Costa: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ronnie Cowan: No.

It is a well-rehearsed argument on deterrence that to prevent other nations from striking us, we must have the ability to strike them. It is of course a flawed theory. I will, however, give the Henry Jackson Society credit for its bravery in issuing a report outlining bold theories about the imminent nuclear threat of other nations just a week after this House was asked to consider the findings of the Chilcot report. Chilcot reminds us that we should be cautious of second-guessing the military intentions of other countries.

In voting on the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons system, we need to ask ourselves: who are these weapons deterring? Can those in favour of Trident genuinely foresee a situation in which China or Russia would commit such an act of economic suicide as a nuclear strike against a western power? The primary factor in establishing peace in an increasingly globalised world is the linked economic interests of nations, not the imminent threat of nuclear attack. To say the world is safer because of nuclear weapons is akin to saying that refit work done in Plymouth rather than having it done in Coulport and see what is actually there. That might help the knowledge. It has been suggested that we might put a conventional missile coming towards it, is going to wait until the thing detonates to find out whether it is a conventional missile or a nuclear missile. That proposal would also involve far more risk to the submariners, because they would have to get much closer to the country that we were deterring. The operations would also have to become more sneaky. People might think that a submarine might want to act sneakily in order to remain hidden, but that is not the case. The idea behind a ballistic missile capability is that it assures people that we can provide a credible deterrent and a credible response to a nuclear attack, either on ourselves or on our allies, but also that it provides other nations with an assurance that we are not planning a sneaky first strike. If we had the kind of technology that some have suggested, it would simply undermine the situation and provoke worry and fear in others.
It is also worth looking at what we have done to reduce our own nuclear weapons. The RAF no longer has strategic bombers, and we have also removed the weapons from Royal Navy shipping. I think that we are, the only one of the declared nuclear powers that has nuclear weapons on one platform only. That is the real way to reduce the nuclear threat, not through some gesture towards disarmament.

Is the nuclear deterrent still needed? To answer that question, we need to look at the alternatives. One of the alternatives put forward is to rely on article V of the north Atlantic treaty—that is what the SNP proposes. NATO is not just a conventional alliance but a nuclear one, yet the SNP would wish to join it. I find it interesting that the SNP wants a nuclear-weapons-free Scotland, yet when I enjoyed all 670 pages of “Scotland’s Future”—the White Paper for independence—I found that it contained the classic comment that the SNP would still allow NATO vessels to visit without confirming or denying whether they carried nuclear weapons. In effect, the SNP’s own version of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” A big ballistic submarine could still pull up, but that would be all right, because the SNP would not have asked the question.

Jan Blackford: What the SNP wants is to be a member of NATO and for NATO to be nuclear-free. That would be the best solution. There is a choice between investing in Trident and extra investment in conventional arms, because the reality is that no conventional surface warships are based in Scotland. We heard about the Falklands earlier, but there are no warships in the Falklands. We are not taking up the responsibilities that we should be. Should we not fix that rather than waste £200 billion on weapons of mass destruction?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, because it gives me the opportunity to expose some of the holes in his defence knowledge. The Royal Navy regularly bases a capital ship around the Falklands when the needs demand it, and there is also an offshore patrol vessel down there.

We have heard in today’s debate that nuclear weapons do not deter Daesh, but a battle tank will not deal with a high-altitude jet aircraft. The reality is that we need to consider the spread of current threats and possible future threats and then look at what we put into them. Could we, as a NATO member, realistically face nuclear blackmail? Yes we could. Vladimir Putin is not revamping his military because he wants it to appear blackmail? Yes we could. Vladimir Putin is not revamping his military because he wants it to appear.

Kevin Foster: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Alberto Costa: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kevin Foster: I apologise to my hon. Friend, but I will press on, given the time.

Although NATO depends on mutual defence, how confident are we that future United States Governments will want to continue to accept 70% of NATO’s bill? How many people are confident that Donald Trump—one an ambassador for business in Scotland—would put the defence of Europe at the top of his list? If he did not, the deterrence against aggression from the east against our eastern allies would ultimately be determined by Britain and France possessing an effective nuclear deterrent.

There are arguments about biological and chemical weapons, but the reality is that if an attack with such weapons was launched against this country by an aggressor state, one part of our potential response would be the consideration of a nuclear response, so that argument does not defeat the need for a deterrent.

Finally, on the argument that international law could get rid of all nuclear weapons, sadly I think that some of the rogue states that are likely to be a threat would just file it along with all the other bits of international law that they are breaking. This debate is about the UK’s ultimate insurance policy and ensuring that we can meet the threats of the future, so there is only one vote that Members can sensibly make this evening, and that vote is Aye.

7.33 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): One of the great traditions of this House is that on matters of conscience, such as that before us today, Members draw on a wide range of different experiences and viewpoints in coming to their conclusions.

The argument has been made that not replacing our nuclear weapons would diminish our international standing and be an abdication of our role as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. We have heard that Trident is a necessary deterrent—the ultimate insurance policy for our nation. People have written to me about the jobs that rely on Trident.

Stephen Pound: My right hon. Friend and I both believe in a tradition of beating swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks. Does he agree that programmes such as KONVER, for the peaceful transition of skilled technicians into peaceful programmes, represent a far better recipe for peace in the world than a never-ending arms race?

Mr Lammy: I commend that Swedish programme. Like my hon. Friend, I stand here first and foremost as a Christian, and I speak from that perspective. I stand here united with Pope Benedict XVI, who has said:

“In a nuclear war there would be no victors, only victims.”

I stand here alongside all the world’s faiths. In the words of the UK multi-faith statement on nuclear weapons:

“All use of nuclear weapons would have devastating humanitarian consequences…and violate the principle of dignity for every human being that is common to each of our faith traditions.”

The idea of loving thy neighbour and protecting our world for future generations simply cannot hold if we have stockpiles of weapons that can destroy our neighbours and our world. Not only do nuclear weapons contradict religious principles, but any form of international relations based on the threat of mutual destruction is totally contradictory to the preamble and article 1 of the United Nations charter, which talks of a system of peaceful resolution of disputes.

It is against that backdrop that I recall that I joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Anti-Apartheid Movement before I became a member of the Labour party. I remember growing up in the 1980s hugely disturbed by the idea of nuclear annihilations, which was played out all the time in films such as “Threads”. The cold war has of course dissipated somewhat, but each of the 40 warheads carried by a Trident
submarine is exponentially more powerful than the atomic bombs that were dropped on Japan in 1945, killing and maiming hundreds of thousands of people and casting a long and dark shadow over our history.

It is right to remind the House of the huge cost of the Trident programme, and to mention my constituents. My constituency has seen two riots in a generation; residential care homes, drop-in centres and youth centres have closed; unemployment is double the national average; and life expectancy is five years below the national average. Haringey is home to 12 of the most deprived wards in the country, and 47% of children in a ward on the doorstep of Spurs live in poverty. Against that backdrop, I cannot with good conscience vote for what is effectively a blank cheque for nuclear weapons.

I am not in the same place that I was as an 18, 19, or 20-year-old. It is possible to come to a multilateralist view and still have concerns about scale and cost. We should ask some pretty hard questions about why we do not share a nuclear capacity with our neighbours in NATO and why we need to have an independent programme at such a huge cost. Given our commitment to nuclear non-proliferation, why do we hear so little about it? Thatcher and Reagan used to talk about it regularly in the 1980s, but why do we vote against non-proliferation at the UN?

People such as Field Marshal Lord Bramall, General Lord Ramsbotham and General Sir Hugh Beach have said:

“Nuclear weapons have shown themselves to be completely useless as a deterrent to the threats and scale of the violence we currently face, or are likely to face—particularly international terrorism.”

Those men are no pacifists or unilateralists, they are simply responding to a changing international context. It is with that in mind that I will vote against the Government tonight.

7.38 pm

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): I have ended up following the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on several occasions, but I will not break the mould by agreeing with him tonight and will be voting with the Government after listening to some of the most powerful speeches that I have heard in this place for a long time. The hon. Members for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) and for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) made passionate cases and, as someone who listens to debates, I can say that their cases have been heard clearly tonight.

Today’s vote is one of the biggest tests for Britain and her place in the world. Given the events of the last few weeks, if we get this wrong, Britain’s place at the heart of an internationalist world could be put at risk. No one can predict the future of our international relations over the coming decades, and the challenges that we face as a nation are tremendous. We face exciting but uncertain times ahead as we carve out Britain’s new position in the world. For me, in the interests of national security, to maintain Britain’s seat at the top table and for the defence of the United Kingdom, it is crucial that strong armed forces are accompanied by a strong nuclear deterrent. I therefore wholeheartedly back the renewal of Trident.

I want to take a moment to thank all our servicemen and women who devote their lives to the security of our nation. We need to do all that we can to ensure that their lives are not put in danger. A strong nuclear deterrent works as a means of promoting peace, co-operation and discourse in a very uncertain world.

I want to look back to the cold war and the effect the presence of nuclear deterrents had on its progress. During the period, there were very many small deadly conflicts where there were no nuclear weapons present, yet the big superpowers were encouraged to avoid hot war at all costs for fear of those deadly weapons being activated. I am not saying that the presence of nuclear weapons will ensure our safety on their own, but if they can have even a small deterrent effect on saving the lives of troops and protecting the United Kingdom, they are a sensible thing to have.

It is important in debates such as this that we remain realistic about future developments on the international stage. If we look at some of the world’s key aggressors such as North Korea, we will see that they are advancing towards the creation of a nuclear warhead. If we were to have no nuclear arsenal or one that was not world leading, we may not face a problem in the here and now, but a few decades on, we may come to a situation in which states may be more inclined to attack the UK, knowing that we cannot answer in the same way.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman have any concern for Scotland and does he know how many nuclear warheads may be pointed at Scotland by the very fact that we have the deterrent based on our soil?

Ben Howlett: I am concerned about not just Scotland, but the rest of the world. Britain’s position in campaigning across the world for a reduction in the number of nuclear weapons should not distract us from what we are debating here today. Given the uncertainties in the world, I believe that we must be pursuing an international approach and an international deterrent via NATO.

I understand that there are Members in this House as well as people across the country who advocate a very different position and are calling for the removal of Trident. However, BAE Systems, Babcock International and Rolls-Royce, all specialists in this area, have made it very clear that the renewal of Trident does not mean that we are moving away from the long-term goal of nuclear non-proliferation, but are instead enhancing it and, at the same time, improving the chances of peace around the whole world.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP) rose—

Ben Howlett: Sorry, I have little time left.

Our approach to nuclear weapons has been measured and proportionate so far, and I welcome that approach and want to see it continue. The UK has set an example of how to implement a minimum strategic deterrent by reducing our warhead total from 200 to 160 in recent years. We should not deviate from that approach as Britain looks to reassert its soft power internationally.

Although the strongest arguments for the renewal of Trident have to be the defence of our nation and our people, there are other arguments that also strengthen
that case, and I wish to finish my remarks by touching on the economic arguments. At a micro level, Trident renewal will have a positive impact on the British economy. Maintaining and sustaining this defence capability supports more than 30,000 jobs and around 2,200 people are already working on the Successor programme. Not only will the renewal of Trident create many more specialist and non-specialist jobs, it is estimated that more than 800 British companies will contribute to the programme and therefore feel the positive effect through jobs and growth. Given the current economic climate, we must focus our attention on that economic argument.

Let us be clear, if we fail to renew Trident, we will be doing more harm than good. If we leave the door open for nuclear blackmail, it would increase the possibility of unnecessary conventional warfare, and decrease our standing in the world. I therefore urge the House, for the benefits of national security, long term peace, and for confidence in the British economy, to support the renewal of Trident.

7.43 pm

**Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a sad irony that a week after the long-awaited Chilcot report highlighted the worrying extent of group-think in Whitehall and Westminster, a large number of MPs will be traipsing through the Lobby in support of the principle of renewing a deterrent that represents a 20th century solution to the 21st century defence and security problems that we all experience today. Those MPs could include those who believed the UK Government’s claptrap on Iraq. Perhaps nothing has been learned from Chilcot, and those MPs will be doing exactly the same on Trident.

The Defence Committee has recently completed an inquiry into the implications of an increased Russian assertiveness for UK security. In evidence session after evidence session, I struggled to find any real evidence of why I should support the renewal of Trident at a cost of up to £205 billion. In fact, as witness after witness listed the very real 21st century threats faced by the UK and our NATO and EU allies, most, if not all, could be filed under the heading of hybrid warfare, or terrorism.

Closer to home, we see an increase in Russian naval and air activities in our own territory, and the pattern is very similar to that experienced in Ukraine. There is no outright aggression, but a determination to poke, prod, check and test reaction times, which, from the UK perspective, have often been laughably slow. For example, the last time the Russian carrier, Admiral Kuznetsov, took shelter in Scottish waters, it took 24 hours for a frigate to arrive from Portsmouth to escort it from the Firth, there were no major surface ships based in Scotland—indeed there was none north of the channel. Trident endangered us by foisting upon us thinking that nuclear deterrence is the only sort of deterrence that we need.

The Royal Navy is now reduced to only 17 usable frigates and destroyers. To put that into context, the force that retook the Falklands in 1982 had more than 40 ships. The Falklands is currently without major warship protection for the first time since that conflict and UK anti-piracy and people smuggling operations in the Mediterranean and Caribbean are frequently undertaken by vessels that are simply not fit for task. To put it simply, Trident is eating into our conventional budget, which leads me to the very nub of the argument—every penny spent on Trident means a penny less spent on conventional defence. It is hardly any surprise that Admiral Lord West recently told the Defence Committee that the Navy had effectively run out of money in support of the new Type 26 programme. Therefore, while the entire Successor programme has funds ring-fenced with added generous contingencies, projects such as the Type 26s, due to be built on the Clyde, face delay after delay with a knock-on effect on construction, affecting jobs, skills and the workforce and our capability to defend ourselves.

Finally, this vote tonight puts hundreds of years of shipbuilding on the Clyde at risk because the MOD has skewed every military budget it has to spend, and it is spending that on Trident. More morally repugnant weapons of mass destruction can no longer be tolerated—indeed we must look at using other methods of modern deterrence—and to quote the Prime Minister, they are a “reckless” gamble that the country can ill afford.

7.49 pm

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): It is an honour to be called in a debate of such national importance. For me, there is one compelling image that encapsulates...
why I will be voting with the Government, and I am sure many other Members have witnessed it. It is those unforgettable, harrowing glass cabinets on display in the Auschwitz museum—the piles of human hair, the mountains of shoes from the victims of the Nazis, which are a permanent, timeless reminder to all of us what happens when peoples and nations are tyrannised and brutalised in existential war.

For me, regardless of all the other arguments, that is overwhelmingly and singularly the key argument. I never, ever want to see my country again in the position that it was in in the 1940s, when we were faced with an existential threat. We were on the verge of being invaded and if that had been successful, we too would have had concentration camps in this country, and all the brutality that would have followed from that.

There may be those who say that such a war is incredibly unlikely. I say to them that there is only one guarantee against it, and that is the nuclear deterrent, however unpalatable that may be. In 1918, people would not have believed that there would be another world war, and surely not another world war even more brutal than the one that they had just experienced, but none of us can predict the future.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Is the hon. Gentleman arguing that we would have nuked Germany?

James Cartlidge: If we had the ability. The nuclear weapon is there for one thing only: to defend this country in the case of existential invasion. It is nothing to do with the terrorist threat or wars such as we had in Iraq. It is that one overriding thing. It is a guarantee of our absolute freedom and existence.

People talk about cost. We cannot have limitless cost. We must have discipline. There can be no blank cheque, but let us talk about some figures that we know definitively. In the first world war 10 million lives were lost. In the second world war 73 million lives were lost, mainly civilians. How many since then? Not a single one in a world war. That has not been a coincidence. Nuclear weapons are horrific, but they have kept the peace.

Dr Julian Lewis: To take my hon. Friend back to the earlier intervention, it is a fact that both Germany and the allies were racing to invent the atomic bomb. There is no doubt that if the Germans had got the atomic bomb first, they would have used it against us, and if we had got the atomic bomb, we would have used it against them, just as the allies did against Japan to bring the war to an end.

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend is right. I do not want to go back over the historic debate but there are those who argue that if the Americans had not used those atomic bombs, the death count of US troops having to invade the Japanese mainland would have been astronomical. No one wants ever to have to use that weapon. It is an horrific thing.

I conclude with what, to me, is the fundamental point. Nuclear weapons are the single most horrible thing ever invented by man, but they have given us the most beautiful thing and we should never take it for granted. They have given peace in our time to every generation represented in this House, and we should not take that for granted. Instead of voting for complacency and relying on others to defend us, we must vote to stand firm and to deliver and guarantee that peace for many more generations to come.

7.53 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friends the Members for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) and for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) referred to their mothers, who were at Greenham common. So was I. I did not meet their mothers, or at least not as far as I am aware, but there were tens of thousands of us who protested against nuclear weapons and the decision on the Cruise missiles, the Pershings and the SS20s. CND had hundreds of thousands on demonstrations. At that time many people believed that we faced the possible advent of a nuclear war. There was real fear in society.

The leader of the Labour party, Michael Foot, has been compared in some debates with our current leader. I worked for and with Michael Foot. He was a great patriotic anti-Fascist. He stood up to the generals—the junta that took over the Falkland Islands—and he spoke in this House on a Saturday morning and made the case for why we had to liberate the Falklands from Fascism. I believe that Michael Foot tried his very best to unite the Labour party, even though he had divisions in his shadow Cabinet. He would not have taken the position that is being taken today by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn).

Michael Foot strove for international agreement and he worked for disarmament, but I and many others who were parliamentary candidates in 1983 know that we went into that election with what became known as “the longest suicide note in history”. In Ilford North where I was the candidate, the Labour vote almost halved and I only just kept second place from going to the new Social Democratic party. The Conservatives were rampant.

Afterwards, I was working in the party’s headquarters on the defence policy. We tried to square the circle by producing a policy document called “Defence and Security for Britain”. It had a Union Jack on the cover. We emphasised strong conventional defence. We called for a defence diversification agency, and we thought that that would be sufficient under Neil Kinnock, our leader, to do much better in 1987. We did do better, but defence policy was still a factor in our losing in 1987. So we had a policy review, which included visiting Moscow, which we did in 1989. Gorbachev was talking about a nuclear-free world by 2000. In that context the Labour party shifted its policy towards one of independent steps, but within a global multilateral framework.

That policy was denounced by the historian E. P. Thompson. I do not have time today to elaborate on this, but I will write about it. In 1989 he denounced the Labour party for going back on its unilateralist position. I wrote in the CND magazine, “What is this unilateralism? Is it a tactic to get something better or is it a quasi-religious totem for left-wing atheists?” I stand by that description of some of the views that we hear today. It has become a quasi-religious totem, rather than a practical means to take measures that bring about real and profound international change. That is why I will be voting for the Government’s motion this evening.
7.57 pm

**Ruth Smeeth** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I am a proud member of both the GMB and Unite trade unions and I stand here today to make the case for our national security, both in terms of the role of the deterrent in an increasingly turbulent world, and for our domestic defence manufacturing capability.

Our country is at a crossroads. Just weeks ago we voted to leave the European Union and to forge our own destiny, but we must do this as part of the family of nations and the global community, embracing our responsibilities as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and as a founder member of the NATO alliance, not running away from them. To be clear, I view the renewal of our continuous at-sea deterrent as a necessary evil. I, like all of us in the Chamber, would like to see a nuclear-free world, but this can be achieved only by international co-operation and be negotiated only from a position of strength.

To disarm ourselves unilaterally would not just be to abandon our responsibilities to our international allies, but would leave us at the mercy of other nuclear powers and would send us, in the words of Nye Bevan, so ably quoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), “naked into the conference-chamber”.

At a time of unprecedented global turmoil, it would be utter recklessness to abandon a fundamental element of our national security in the name of some abstract ideological objection, however well meaning.

**Mrs Moon:** Should we not get this into some sort of perspective? By 2020 the UK’s stockpile of nuclear weapons will be no more than 180, with only 120 operationally available, whereas Russia, China and North Korea have between 6,500 and 8,500 between them.

**Ruth Smeeth:** My hon. Friend ably outlines the threat we really face.

The horrific attacks in Nice last week were just the latest reminder of the risks we face. We are living through a period of extraordinary global turmoil, with threats coming from not just international terrorist networks but a resurgence in tensions between state actors—not least Russia, as the Defence Committee outlined only this month. Not only should Russian actions in Crimea, Ukraine and the Arctic give us pause for thought, but the Russian nuclear doctrine has also changed radically, and for the worse, since the end of the cold war. Not since the fall of the Berlin wall has our deterrent been so critical to our national security. Russia, with its use of increasingly hostile rhetoric, is lowering its nuclear threshold. This is, therefore, no time for Britain to abandon our nuclear capabilities or our commitments to our friends and allies.

Our military is rightly widely admired as the best in the world, and we in this place owe it to the members of our military to ensure that they are provided with the resources and support they need to ensure that our country is prepared for any scenario. However, we must also look closer to home—to the security of our communities and our economy. On that basis, the argument for our deterrent is unquestionable. Tens of thousands of jobs depend on our commitment to the Successor programme.

**Angela Crawley:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Ruth Smeeth:** I am not giving way.

Whole communities live their lives in the shadow of the shipyards and the darker shadow that falls alongside them—the uncertainty over their future and their livelihoods. These are skilled men and women, working good jobs to support their families, including in my city of Stoke-on-Trent, where one local company in Burslem contributes to the supply chain of the Successor programme. These communities need our support and our commitment to their industry, and today we have the opportunity to offer them the reassurance they need.

As a country, we need to protect our manufacturing capability and to ensure long-term investment in our national industry. As has been repeatedly stated in this debate—most powerfully by my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock)—the renewal of our deterrent is my party’s policy and my union’s. For those who understand the proud history of our movement, that should come as no surprise. From Major Attlee’s support for Churchill in our country’s darkest hour to the founding of NATO under Ernest Bevin, our party has always stood up first and foremost for the security of our nation—we do now, and we always will.

As Tim Roache, the general secretary of my union, the GMB, has said:

“We’ve had enough of politicians on all sides playing politics with tens of thousands of highly skilled jobs and the communities they support.”

For the sake of those communities, for the sake of our economy and for the long-term security of our country, I will be voting in favour of replacing the current Vanguard submarines with the new Successor class, and I urge others to do the same.

8.3 pm

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Today’s vote and our decision about Trident are at the heart of what kind of future we want for ourselves and our children. However, it is also about the hard evidence and what we mean by safety in an uncertain and changing world.

The theory that having nuclear weapons makes us safer is entirely unproven, and nor can it be proven. As David Krieger from Waging Peace writes:

“In logic, one cannot prove a negative, that is, that doing something causes something else not to happen. That a nuclear attack has not happened may be a result of any number of other factors, or simply of exceptional good fortune.”

Indeed, many military experts argue that, in fact, nuclear weapons make us less safe, primarily because their very existence increases the likelihood that they will be used and contributes to the amount of nuclear material circulating around the world.

Back in 2014, senior military, political and diplomatic figures, including former Conservative Foreign Secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind, former Defence Secretary Des Browne and former Foreign Secretary Lord Owen, came together with the explicit aim of “shining a light on the risks posed by nuclear weapons.” They said:

“We believe the risks posed by nuclear weapons and the international dynamics that could lead to nuclear weapons being used are underestimated or insufficiently understood by world leaders.”
The Government’s main argument for replacing Trident appears to be that it is the ultimate insurance in an uncertain world, but what they fail to acknowledge is that our possession of nuclear weapons in contravention of the non-proliferation treaty is exacerbating that uncertainty—it is leading to the very scenario that it is designed to avoid.

Nor have the advocates of nuclear weapons ever explained why, if Trident is so vital to protecting us, that is not also the case for every other country in the world. How can we possibly try to deny other countries the right to acquire nuclear weapons if we are upgrading our own nuclear weapons? Do proponents of Trident renewal genuinely believe that a world where all countries have nuclear weapons would be safer than the one we live in today?

Such immunity to reason means that there is a blinkered approach to the heightened risk of accidents or threats to UK nuclear weapons, whether that is in Scotland, at the Faslane and Coulport bases, or in England, at AWE Aldermaston and Burghfield, or whether it is in relation to the nuclear warhead convoys taken out on our public roads, such as the M4 and the M25—indeed, some were seen on the M74 just a few weeks ago—and which go through small villages, sometimes up to a dozen times a year.

There is also little recognition of the fact that nuclear weapons systems are themselves fallible. According to a quite shocking report by Chatham House, there have been 13 incidents since 1962 in which nuclear weapons have nearly been launched. One of the most dramatic—indeed, some were seen on the M74 just a few weeks ago—and which go through small villages, sometimes up to a dozen times a year.

People say that we cannot un-invent things that have been invented, but biological weapons were banned in 1972, chemical weapons in 1993, landmines in 1997 and cluster munitions in 2008. If the political will is there, it can be done.

Dr Julian Lewis: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Caroline Lucas: No.

Right now, around 130 countries have endorsed a UN motion calling for a global ban treaty on nuclear weapons. Negotiations for that global ban treaty may begin next year, but this Government are holding out and refusing to engage with multilateral UN processes to secure a nuclear-free world. The Government therefore have no credibility when they say they are seriously working for a nuclear-free world. In an increasingly interconnected world, where our security is deeply linked to the security of those around us, and where we need to be gradually doing the slow and hard work of disarming, the Government’s response is the wrong one, and it takes us backwards. By voting to renew Trident, we are sending a signal that power by any means is necessary.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Last year, the Government produced their strategic defence and security review and the accompanying national security strategy, identifying the threats to the security of the United Kingdom and weighing them according to the perceived likelihood and level of threat. The documents also attempted to offer a response to those perceived threats in terms of the shape and strength of our armed forces in future years. However, the Government are disregarding the findings of their own SDSR in terms of the threats posed, by positing the UK’s entire defensive structure on the retention of the continuous at-sea nuclear weapons deterrent.

The affordability of the programme is a major issue because the costs of the entire Trident programme must be met from a finite military budget and at the expense of conventional forces and resources to combat new threats, such as cyber.

Angela Crawley: Does my hon. Friend agree that, ultimately, the Government should prioritise their spending on intelligence and national security to combat terrorism and cyber-security issues, rather than on nuclear weapons that can never be used?

Steven Paterson: I do accept that, but it is fair to say that, in the SDSR, the Government did make significant moves forward and invested correctly in intelligence and cyber. However, it is also true that we face a choice between investing in nuclear weapons and in conventional weapons and all those other responses: we cannot spend the money twice.

The Government have identified that £31 billion is necessary for the construction of the four replacement submarines, with a £10 billion contingency fund for unanticipated costs. However, the true costs of this programme in its entirety, including maintenance, the missiles and the nuclear warheads, will undoubtedly be far higher. As we heard earlier from the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, it could be £179 billion over the lifetime of the programme. We have form here. In the 2010 SDSR, the cost of replacing the submarines came in at £20 billion, but it is now £31 billion, with a £10 billion contingency for when it overruns, which is likely, given what happened with the Astute submarines—they overran.

I remind those saying we can have a nuclear deterrent and a capable military force that the 2010 SDSR is responsible for the Royal Navy going from 23 surface vessels to 19, with 40,000 personnel lost from the UK regular forces. Only last week, the House debated some of the appalling failures in appropriately arming and equipping our armed forces for deployment in Iraq, with Chilcot identifying a refusal to allocate a sufficient budget as a direct and damning failure. I ask colleagues to consider that before voting tonight, because this will be a vast and recurring spend over a number of decades. The Defence Secretary has said that his estimate of the cost of operating the continuous at-sea deterrent is about 6% of the defence budget, or about £2 billion to £2.3 billion per year. However, the fall in the value of sterling since Brexit could impact. One would imagine that the costs could go up, and our experience so far with other programmes is that that is what happens.
I turn to one of the central assumptions in the argument of those who support the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons system for a period stretching to the 2060s—the assumed inability of an enemy to detect the single nuclear weapon-armed submarine on patrol at any given time. It is over 40 years until the 2060s—the projected end of the Successor submarines’ operational lives. Given the technological advances of the past 40 years—the internet, mobile phones, and satellite technology—are we seriously saying that we can predict accurately where technology will have taken us 40 years hence? This is a decision to commit a gigantic sum of money, over subsequent decades, to the continuation of the Trident programme, yet we must assume that there will be no technological advance that will allow for the detection of these vessels beneath the ocean surface. That is not tenable. Were such a technological advance to occur, even the most ardent advocate of the continuous at-sea deterrent would have to concede that it would mean the loss of the system’s most important advantage. In such circumstances, the continuous at-sea deterrent would be rendered vulnerable, if not altogether obsolete. Sea drones are one such technology currently being considered that may have the potential to be propagated in coming decades. The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee suggested that that might happen. Such a development would, at least, require considerable investment in counter-measures, putting more pressure on future defence budgets.

Finally, I want to mention the elephant in the room—possible Scottish independence. I have no intention of getting into why this would be a very good idea for Scotland, although it would, but it has a direct and profound bearing on our debate, and it has not come up much tonight. Whether or not hon. Members agree that Scottish independence is preferable, it is at least a possibility. Such a development would, at least, require considerable investment in counter-measures, putting more pressure on future defence budgets.

Mr Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): So it is that I, as a democratic socialist, support every word of the motion before us in the name of the Prime Minister, because the truth is that the preservation of our national security does not wear the colours of any political party.

I begin by reaching out to all those in our country who do not support the retention and renewal of the UK’s nuclear deterrent. This is a frequently polarised debate, but I want to say to those who oppose renewal that I understand how and why they feel the way that they do. I understand how and why their opposition to nuclear weapons motivates them to vote and act in certain ways, and I understand their fears. Like those people, like every defence worker and trade union representative of defence workers, and like the people who live in the communities where those jobs are so valued, I hope for a world free of nuclear weapons. I wish that we could uninject those weapons of mass destruction, but we cannot, and will never be able to do so.

The world is an increasingly difficult and challenging place. The complexities we face in international affairs, foreign relations and diplomatic matters are increasing, not receding, and even if a mood swept our country that saw unilateral nuclear disarmament as desirable, I would argue against such a move. Multilateralism is the only way forward for our country. We can and should only divest ourselves of our nuclear weapons when those who seek to do us harm divest themselves of their nuclear arsenals too. The arguments for a multilateral approach to the UK’s nuclear deterrent, our obligations under the non-proliferation treaty, our responsibilities towards our allies, global security, and more, are compelling.

An American diplomat told me recently about an emerging view on the left and right of American politics that the United States is tired of both fighting and paying for Europe’s safety. American politicians, in Congress and elsewhere, increasingly think that their European partners are not pulling their weight. There is already a long-term diplomatic pivot taking place in US foreign policy. Other alliances outside of Europe are being sought and established. That is the right of the US, but we risk the strategic relationship that we have enjoyed with it if we conspicuously fail to take the necessary steps to maintain our own nuclear deterrent.

Alongside this, we have a belligerent Russia on the borders of the European Union—a Russia that is now not only replacing its nuclear fleet but renewing it with a new programme of research, development and manufacture for a new generation of nuclear missiles. More concerning is the fact the Russian military has changed its nuclear engagement protocols. The new protocols permit the use of nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict in order to achieve “de-escalation”—an incredible proposition, but true none the less. Is this the time, with a weaker EU, an exasperated United States, and a sabre-rattling Russia, for the United Kingdom to abandon its nuclear deterrent? No, it is not.

Margaret Ferrier: Obviously the hon. Gentleman supports the renewal of Trident. Has he any idea why his colleagues in the Scottish Parliament do not?

Mr Reed: That is a matter for my friends in the Scottish Parliament.

It is the policy of the Labour party to retain and renew our nuclear deterrent. As a Labour Member of Parliament, steeped in my party’s traditions, proud of its achievements, and excited by its possibilities, I will support my party’s policy tonight. But for the first time ever, we have witnessed the leader of the Labour party stand at the Dispatch Box and argue against the policy of the party that he leads. That is unprecedented. Moreover, this reckless, juvenile, narcissistic irresponsibility makes me fearful for the future of the party that I love. The sheer stupidity of this approach should be dragged out into the light and seen for what it is, because renewal is not only Labour party policy but the settled will of the country, and every parliamentary decision relating to it will have been taken by 2020.

Further to that, Lord Kinnock has repeatedly warned—and it looks as though he will have to say this to the Labour party for the second time in my lifetime—that “the British people will not vote for unilateral disarmament. And that reality has to be dealt with.”

A policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament is a bar to being elected. A democratic socialist party with this policy can campaign to rid this country of poverty, to restore the national health service, to rebuild our economy,
and to make sure that every man, woman and child in every community in our country enjoys equality of opportunity—but campaigning is all that it will ever do, because a policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament will ensure that we will never govern. This logic is inescapable, and the leader of the Labour party knows it.

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Chris Law: There is a little flaw in the hon. Gentleman’s argument. The SNP has 56 out of 59 seats here and in the Scottish Government, and we all hold to the position of unilateral disarmament. To give him some hope, we are doing what he hopes his party can do in future.

Mr Reed: I commend the hon. Gentleman for that audacious and fundamentally incorrect intervention. I really do applaud his audacity.

The logic is inescapable, and the leader of the Labour party knows it. So we are forced to accept that the refusal to support the established policy of the Labour party and to acknowledge the achievements of the greatest Labour Government is not just a knowing embrace of electoral defeat but a real, studied and determined desire to split the Labour party. The manifesto I stood on at the last election pledged to renew our nuclear deterrent. The manifesto that I will stand on at the next election will pledge to renew our nuclear deterrent, whether the leader of the Labour party likes it or not. That will be true for hundreds of colleagues on the Labour Benches.

I urge all colleagues on the Labour Front Bench to respect the democratic processes of the Labour party, to respect the conference decision of the Labour party, and to vote with the established policy of the Labour party, and if they cannot do that, to return to the Back Benches.

8.18 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I am against the renewal of Trident for all the reasons that have been so ably laid out by my hon. Friends here today. I am mainly against it because, morally, it is a corrupt concept. It is a weapon that is designed to kill people indiscriminately. The Prime Minister said earlier that she was willing to take the decision to kill hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women and children, but she should perhaps take some advice from the International Court of Justice, which says:

“States must never make civilians the object of attack and must consequently never use weapons that are incapable of distinguishing between civilian and military targets.”

In my time as an MP, I have held many surgeries around my constituency. People come to me with their problems and I try to help them as best I can. Sometimes people come to my surgeries in tears because their disability benefits have been cut because the UK Government do not have the money to give them a decent life. People come to me saying that they have been unfairly sanctioned because the welfare budget has to be trimmed because there is no money. Women who were born in the 1950s come to my surgeries to tell me that they have to miss out on their pensions because there is no money. When Conservative and Labour Members tell us that it does not matter how much the Trident replacement costs, I tell them to come to my surgery, look those people in the face and tell them that.

If Conservative and Labour Members want to spend up to £205 billion on replacing Trident, they should think about the consequences for people. Incidentally, those consequences stretch right into my constituency, to the Army base that has been there for 250 years. Fort George is on a Ministry of Defence list of sites considered for closure because there is no money. That is the benefit of MOD spend, but it will be taken away from conventional, hard-working and valuable service personnel to pay for useless weapons of mass destruction.

Mr Jamie Reed: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: No, I am going to carry on.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) has said, our future threats include cyber-attacks. There has been hardly any talk of the future investment needed to make sure that we make vulnerable systems invulnerable. I want to quote—[Interruption.] I know that the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) likes to intervene, but he rarely says anything of value. The Defense Science Board final report, “Resilient, Military Systems and the Advanced Cyber Threat”—

Alberto Costa: rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There can be only one Member on his feet at one time. The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) is not willing to give way, because he wants other colleagues to be able to get in. Come on through, Drew Hendry.

Drew Hendry: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have lost a wee bit of time, but I will be as quick as I can.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the spiralling cost, which is even more difficult to calculate because of the massive fluctuations in the currency market as a result of the Brexit vote?

Drew Hendry: I can only agree with my colleague. I was about to make a point about the vulnerability of the military systems. The Defense Science Board report states:

“The United States cannot be confident that our critical Information Technology (IT) systems will work under attack from a sophisticated and well-resourced opponent utilizing cyber capabilities in combination with all of their military and intelligence capabilities.”

We face the prospect of investing in a military dodo, but the situation is even worse because it can be hacked and used against us, and the Government plan to spend up to £205 billion on it.

I will not vote for Trident renewal tonight, for all of the good reasons that have been laid out, one after another, by my colleagues, but the main reason is that it is an obscenity.

8.23 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): This debate is welcome, but I think that many Members will realise that it is not entirely necessary. The Government have initiated a debate the main purpose of which is to create, or highlight, discords in the Labour party.
Frankly, however, the Labour party does not need any encouragement from the Government—it is doing a very good job of that itself.

More seriously, the four main threats to the UK identified in the strategic defence and security review were terrorism, the resurgence of state-based threats, the impact of technology and the erosion of the rules-based international order. Trident replacement, which will use 6% of our defence budget, will partially address one of those threats, namely the state-based threat from Russia.

As we have heard this evening, if we go ahead and build four submarines, they will cost us more than £31 billion. Five years ago, the figure was £21 billion. Given that the Scottish National party does not want the system, the cost is irrelevant to its Members, but those of us who want some sort of system, including the Liberal Democrats, are entitled to hear from the Government what the actual cost will be. We have heard figures that range from £179 billion to £200 billion-plus. We are also entitled to some clarity on whether the Government have finally tied down the uncertain issue of who will actually manage the system.

Our position is that we believe that we should retain a nuclear capability. We believe that the threats are such that the United Kingdom needs to have a nuclear deterrent, but we do not believe in a like-for-like replacement, which is why we will vote against the Government today. The party’s position has been debated at great length over the years. It was agreed in 2013, but it is still being debated, including at this very moment.

We seek to take a step down the nuclear ladder, but believe that giving up nuclear weapons in a unilateralist way—simply saying, “We no longer wish to retain nuclear weapons”—would not give us any leverage in non-proliferation discussions. Keeping a seat at the negotiating table is important, and having a smaller nuclear capability would ensure that we build submarines and retain the skills that, as we have heard, are so important for the country’s nuclear capability.

While a move away from continuous at-sea deterrence would strike some as leaving us more vulnerable, it would still mean that we had a nuclear capability and would keep many options open in a way that unilateralism would not. Indeed, it would make a contribution to our non-proliferation commitments. I asked the Prime Minister to explain how like-for-like replacement would comply with article VI, but I am afraid that I received no answer.

It is not 1980. Although we face threats, we do not face the existential threats that we faced then. It is a different world, and there is a way that we can begin to climb down another rung of the nuclear ladder and provide others with an incentive to do so as well. We have the opportunity to do that, and I hope that we will take it now.

8.26 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Government Members seem to have the idea that we in the Scottish National party are against nuclear weapons for some kind of romanticised reason, but the reality is that we are against nuclear weapons and renewing Trident for logical reasons.

First, we have to remember the fact that, fundamentally, Trident is a weapon. We have already established that we would not fire first, so the only time that we would ever use this weapon would be if somebody launched a nuclear strike against us. To be frank, that would mean that we were all dead anyway. If I am dying, I do not care if we send a weapon back; I am more worried about the one that is coming towards me.

We keep hearing the phrase, “We can’t predict the future”; but if we are going to make defence policy, surely we have to think wisely about what we are deterring. What are the threats that we face? The 2015 national security strategy set out the tier 1 threats faced by the UK: international terrorism, climate change and cybercrime. How many terrorist attacks have nuclear weapons protected us or France from? The answer is zero. They have got hee-haw to do with climate change or cybercrime, so that brings us back to the argument that they are a deterrent, but only nine countries in the world have nuclear weapons. How come the other 180-plus countries do not feel the need to have this deterrent?

What other arguments are there for keeping Trident? We keep hearing that we need to keep it for the sake of jobs. Yes, it involves skilled engineers, scientists and workers who work very hard and are very talented, but why do we not invest the billions of pounds that we are proposing to spend on it in our energy and engineering sectors? Why do we not use that money in our renewable energy sectors? Climate change is a tier 1 threat to us, so why do we not spend that money on trying to tackle it?

If these weapons are not a security necessity and they are not necessary to save jobs, that prompts the question: what are they for? The fact of the matter is that this is all really about the UK maintaining a permanent place on the UN Security Council. As the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), who is unfortunately not in his seat, made clear, these weapons serve no purpose other than satisfying the ego of the British establishment. This is about us putting our stamp on a world from which we are isolating ourselves more and more.

Too many times, I have sat in this Chamber and heard, as my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) eloquently said, that we cannot afford to look after the disabled, we cannot afford to look after our unemployed and we cannot afford to pay pensions on time. We have heard Conservative Members say that they are the Government making the difficult choices, but the very same people who made the argument for austerity are now telling us that we can afford to write a blank cheque for these useless weapons. And for what? To preserve Westminster’s self-indulgent image of importance. This is all part of the Government’s long-term economic sham.

I want to provide some context about the reality of what this means. Paisley Gilmour Street, in my constituency, is the busiest railway station in Scotland outside Glasgow and Edinburgh, and it is one of the main routes on which nuclear waste is transported. Used nuclear rods come through my constituency, not in the dead of night but during the day when people are standing on the platform waiting to go to work in Greenock, or wherever else. If a mistake was made and an accident happened, it would be the equivalent of a dirty bomb. I put it to the Government that they, and their obsession with nuclear weapons, are one of the greatest threats facing my constituents.

8.30 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to support the motion. The Prime Minister said earlier that the first duty of a Government is to protect
their citizens. I would add that the first duty of an Opposition, if they hope to become a Government, is to convince the electorate and the public at large that they will, and above all that they can, do the same. The Opposition cannot be ambiguous on that commitment. I fully understand those in our party who feel that their ethical values and the values of the Labour party are incompatible with that stance, but the public—the electorate—do not feel that our values and ethics are an adequate defence in the face of military aggression from countries that might threaten us.

I am old enough to remember campaigning in the days when Labour’s policy was unilateralism. I remember the cruel caricature of Labour’s defence policy, which was somebody standing with their hands up, labelled “Labour’s defence policy.” Regrettably, it resonated with many of Labour’s traditional voters. The feeling that, above all, people are entitled to security transcends voting behaviour, social class and income. It goes right across the piece, and Labour paid a very high price for failing to recognise that in the 1980s.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) talked about how we succeeded in changing Labour’s former policy. Change it we did, and since then, whatever disagreements the electorate have had with Labour, they have not been about defence. We have won three general elections with a multilateral defence policy. In fact, multilateral defence and an independent nuclear deterrent have been our policy for the last six general elections and were a manifesto commitment in the last general election. That is backed by trade unions, which recognise that any removal of Trident would have a huge impact on levels of employment and skills, which are absolutely essential to people’s welfare.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Bailey: I am sorry, I will not give way, because too many others want to speak.

Above all, the policy is backed by the public. For that policy to be overturned, four thresholds have to be met. The first is that there must be a huge improvement in international relations. That has quite clearly not happened—things have deteriorated. Russia’s lowering of the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons, its activities in Ukraine, the situation in North Korea and the ability of terrorists to take over a country and possibly acquire nuclear technology mean that the world is much more dangerous.

The second threshold is that there must be a compelling change of technology that would render nuclear submarines irrelevant. That has not happened. The third is a financial capacity that renders us unable to build them. That has not happened. The last is overwhelming evidence of public support shifting against the deterrent. That clearly has not happened.

8.35 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): As we know, it was the famous post-war Labour Government who first acquired Britain’s nuclear deterrent. Clement Attlee had just been elected Prime Minister when America dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945. He realised in an instant that the air raid wardens and fire engines that had fought to limit the damage done by Hitler’s bombs were now useless in the face of the awesome destructive power of this new weapon. He reasoned that the only way to protect the population was to have the ability to fight back, and therefore to deter the initial threat.

Since then, Labour has for the most part adopted a multilateral stance on disarmament, believing that while other countries possess nuclear weapons, Britain should not disarm unilaterally. Our 2015 manifesto maintained our commitment to a minimum credible independent nuclear capability, and to looking at further reductions in global stockpiles. By 2025, the UK will have achieved a 65% reduction in the size of its nuclear stockpile.

This Parliament has always taken our disarmament goals seriously, but the world is too unstable and unpredictable right now to contemplate getting rid of our main defence strategies. Part of the abolitionist argument generally relies on the belief that nuclear weapons would not work against the current threats to the modern world from terrorist organisations such as Daesh and Boko Haram. However, just because they would not be used to combat such threats, that does not negate their use as a deterrent against other or future unknown threats. Those with whom we do not always agree—Russia, Iran, China and North Korea, for example—understand the relevance of nuclear weapons and have sought to increase their own capabilities.

I am proud of the superb engineering skills that are nurtured in this highly skilled industry. The MOD has stated that “maintaining and sustaining the UK’s nuclear deterrent supports over 30,000 UK jobs and makes a significant contribution to the UK economy”.

Angela Crawley: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: No, I will not give way.

That is why both Unite and the GMB support the renewal of our submarines. Scrapping Trident would place skilled manufacturing jobs in my region in jeopardy. There are 20 businesses across the north-east involved in the supply chain for Britain’s Navy defence submarines. Our region is at risk of losing millions of pounds of funding after Brexit. I know from personal bitter experience of the demise of coal and shipbuilding that job losses on such a scale will lead to communities being wiped out. The fact is that if a decision is taken not to replace Trident, jobs will disappear and we will never see them again.

I acknowledge there remains an absence of a truly definitive cost for renewal, but one thing we can all agree on is that it will be incredibly expensive, and that needs to be monitored. The reality is that either we have Trident or we do not, and if we have it, we have to pay for it. If nuclear missiles were cheap or easy to come by, the world would be in serious trouble. The deterrent represents the ultimate security guarantee for the UK, and I believe that, right now, the potential costs of retaining it are worth more than the risks of disarmament.

8.38 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I believe we should oppose the maintenance of the continuous at-sea deterrent. For me, the arguments are both moral and practical. I will take the moral argument first.
I believe it is important that we all give full consideration to the scale of destruction that modern nuclear weapons can deliver. I want to read out a message from the mayor of Hiroshima in a recent statement:

“On August 6, 1945, a single atomic bomb rendered Hiroshima a scorched plain and tens of thousands were burned in flames. By year’s end, 140,000...lives had been taken. Those who managed to survive, their lives grotesquely distorted, were left to suffer serious physical and emotional after effects compounded by discrimination and prejudice. Nuclear weapons are an absolute evil and ultimate inhumanity.”

Louise Haigh: In the same statement, the mayor of Hiroshima called on us all to share the sincere message of their hibakusha:

“No one else should ever suffer as we have”.

Does my hon. Friend not share my concern that this latest round of renewal makes it difficult to ignore the fact that we are moving against our international duty into an era of permanent armament?

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes a good case, and I agree with her.

Contemporary nuclear weapons are capable of delivering much greater levels of devastation, and they are eight to 10 pounds heavier than those that hit Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One modern missile with 12 warheads could wipe out a city of 10 million people and leave it uninhabitable. As the International Court of Justice put it back in 1996:

“The destructive power of nuclear weapons cannot be contained in either space or time. They have the potential to destroy all civilization and the entire ecosystem of the planet.”

That is chilling, and it is important to keep hold of that vision of horror when considering Trident renewal.

I recently visited Woodchurch high school in my constituency, where I met the school council, which comprises pupils from each of the different year groups aged between 11 and 16. I asked them who felt that we should renew Trident. There was a slight sense of agitation in the room, and I wondered whether they were just a little shy on the topic. I then asked if anyone was definitely opposed to the renewal, and every hand shot up in the air without hesitation. The decisions that we make about nuclear deterrence today will have an impact on our children for decades, and it is important to remember that we are making a decision for the next generation.

The defence challenges that we now face are different from those in the post-1945 era when the world seemed divided into ideological blocs and the threat came primarily from other states, principally the Soviet Union. An attack was thought of in terms of a conventional military attack or a nuclear strike. Yes, there are concerns over the intentions of President Putin’s Russia. The annexation of Crimea and Russian involvement in the civil war in Ukraine has had a destabilising effect on security in central and eastern Europe, but we must also counter the threat from non-state actors such as terrorist groups. Nuclear weapons will not enable us to meet that threat, and money allocated to Trident could mean that the defence budget is not focused on the most serious challenges that we face. Trident’s replacement is projected to be operational for 30 years from the early 2030s. Is it possible to be sure that it will be an effective deterrent in 2060? There is plenty of evidence to suggest that it will not.

I recently attended a meeting addressed by Lord Browne, the Labour Defence Secretary in 2006-07. He made a compelling argument against the renewal of Trident, focusing particularly on two practical issues: cyber-security and the detection of submarines by enemy forces. He warned that NATO countries cannot be confident that their nuclear defence systems would be able to survive an attack from a sophisticated and well-resourced opponent that was utilising cyber-capabilities in combination with its military and intelligence capabilities.

The Prime Minister spoke about the value of nuclear submarines patrolling our seas unseen and undetected. That may well be the case today, but it is not a given for the future. There is a real threat that with the increase in under-sea detection technology, the location of submarines is more likely to be compromised, thus undermining the fundamental rationale of continuous at-sea deterrence, which relies on submarines remaining undetected. There is also a real risk that advancement in detection technology will outpace any advancement in counter-measures.

It is important to take into account all the jobs that are reliant on Trident, and that a credible industrial strategy is created and a cogent plan signed off before any action is taken to not renew it. Jobs, skills, and incomes should be protected. I believe, however, that there is a real risk that these expensive weapons may become obsolete over the period of their lives, and we would be better off investing in a defence strategy that addresses the real dangers that we face from current strategic threats.

8.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. This issue has been framed as contentious, controversial and sensitive, and it has been given unneeded attention from various sections of our media and political activists within and without this House. Most unfortunate of all is the fact that too many concerns have been proven to be political dogma, masked all too often by false and misguided idealism. Some in this House ignore the reality, but we must debate that reality and present it to the House. I fully support Trident renewal, and in the Northern Ireland Assembly, aerospace, defence, security and space have been identified as priorities in the programme for government. Therefore, if jobs are coming off the back of Trident, we in Northern Ireland will take them—if they are available, send them our way.

As everyone knows, our national security is no game, and Members will be hard-pushed to find someone who disagrees with the fact that the world is over-armed and that we need to move away from war, violence and weapons with nuclear capabilities. However, we have not yet realised that ideal world, and to ignore that would be to put our country and its people in danger. Our country would be less protected than it was yesterday, and we would be more threatened by enemies who would immediately be less deterred from attacking our country. We need to be prepared for the real world we live in, with all its inherent dangers. I continue to implore those opposed to a deterrent to consider that when we take all things into consideration and are rational about the issue, the arguments consistently and
overwhelmingly stack up on the renewal side of the argument. Our deterrent is a deterrent, not an aggressor or a destroyer. It is fit for purpose and will be used only for its purpose.

Not only does Trident act as a deterrent and have the potential to be extremely effective, the efficacy of the system is testimony to the continued strength of British defence. Trident forms an integral part of our strong and ready defence of a strong and proud country. Over 30 countries have weapons of mass destruction, be they nuclear or biological. The list contains our closest allies in NATO, but not all of those countries are in NATO. Were we to remove our deterrent, we would be stepping off the world stage and making our country a less significant player around the globe, and a less significant partner. We need the United Kingdom to remain strong. We need the United Kingdom now more than ever at the top table when it comes to global security. Scaling back our capabilities at a time when the world is more armed than ever, and is an incredibly volatile place, is not the way the go. The aims of disarmament need to press ahead. It is an aim that I am sure we all hope will come to fruition one day, but the ideal world does not yet exist and the context is not yet set for today to be that day for the United Kingdom.

Trident ensures, ultimately, that the United Kingdom would be able to stand up for itself even in the worst scenario imaginable. It sends out a strong message that no matter how many people talk down our standing as a nation, we remain one of the most staunchly defended nations on this earth, ready for whatever our enemies might throw at us. What is contentious about defending our country? What is controversial about preparing our country for the worst? What is sensitive about ensuring our country can react appropriately to the unthinkable? When cool heads come together and rational minds meet, the correct decision on this issue should court no controversy at all. Renewing our nuclear deterrent is the right thing to do; indeed, it is the only thing we can do. We in the Democratic Unionist party will support the Government tonight and join them in the Lobby to retain Trident and have Trident renewal.

8.46 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I was elected by 15,000 voters with a 7,000 majority on a Labour manifesto in favour of Trident and multilateral disarmament. I am aware, however, of people in my constituency and in the Labour party who are against Trident. Indeed, I was a member of CND and am related to Henry Richard, the apostle of peace from Tregaron.

I need to go through the arguments that have been deployed against Trident. The first is that nuclear arms are awful and appalling weapons. Well, we know that and that is why they are such an awful deterrent. They are a deterrent because they are terrible weapons. The second is that these arms are obsolete and redundant because of various technological advances. If that is the case, why are Russia, China, France and the US investing in them? The technologists say they are not redundant. It is said that they cannot combat cybercrime or terrorism, but they are not designed to do so. Thirdly, it is said that they cost a lot of money. Well, £30 billion, plus £10 billion contingency, is a lot of money. It is something like £1.2 billion a year just for the capital costs, which is approximately 6% of defence procurement spending. That is a lot of money, but it would not transform the NHS or our conventional armaments, and it supports something like 32,000 jobs.

The key issue is this: do these weapons deter? As a member of the Council of Europe, when I talk to Ukrainian MPs they say, “If we had maintained a nuclear deterrent, the Russians wouldn’t have invaded Crimea and eastern Ukraine.” When I speak to MPs from Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, they say to me, “We’ve got Russian minorities, just like Ukraine. Russia will invade us. If the UK doesn’t have a nuclear deterrent, what are you going to do—come up with your conventional arms?” Our enemies will say that they will use tactical nuclear weapons and blow up Coventry. What are we going to do? Let them blow it up so that they can rewrite history and say, “It’s like Hiroshima, we saved lives”?

It is not difficult to think of scenarios where nuclear blackmail is effective, whether involving Russia or North Korea. That is sufficient reason to support a minimum nuclear deterrent. We could withdraw and say that we will be part of a nuclear alliance, letting France and America protect us. But what if France unilaterally disarms? What if Donald Trump comes along? Is he going to support us? I think not.

My position is the same as Aneurin Bevan’s. He died the year I was born—it was not my fault, by the way. He was, basically, a multilateralist like me. He understood that the purpose of these awful weapons was to sustain peace and prevent war. The purpose of the deterrence is to save lives, not to take them, and to deter aggression, not to attack. We all wish that these weapons did not exist, but the question is—and I respect the fact that it is a difficult question: do we want to take responsibility for the deaths of people if we do not have the deterrent and that provokes aggression?

Our nuclear capability has halved since the cold war. We have only 1% of the current nuclear stockpile of 17,000 nuclear weapons and our plan is to reduce their number further. In my view, we need—this is the lesser of two evils—a minimum capability. I wish we did not, but we do. The acid test is this: with nuclear weapons, will more or fewer people die? In my judgment, fewer people will die, and therefore we need to support the motion.

8.50 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I rise to speak in favour of the motion, for the following reasons. First, it is the policy on which I was elected. My Labour colleagues and I were elected on the basis of a manifesto commitment to support the retention of an independent nuclear deterrent, and that is what we must do tonight. As a committed democrat, I intend to fulfil the mandate given to me by the 15,000 people in Aberavon who elected me, and my colleagues should do the same and fulfil the mandate they have from the 9.3 million people who voted Labour last May.

The second reason is jobs. As a Member of Parliament proud to represent the steelmaking heartland of Britain and Wales, I am acutely aware of the industrial implications that a vote against the motion would have. Across its lifetime, Trident will support almost 26,000 jobs, including
13,000 in advanced manufacturing. It will affect more than 1,000 businesses in almost 450 towns and cities across Britain. Scrapping Trident would further skew the economy, defence having come one of the few sectors reliably and consistently creating sustainable, highly skilled and well-paid jobs outside London. As Unite the union stated just a few days ago, there can be no “moral case for a trade union accepting the obliteration of thousands of its members' jobs and the communities in which they live being turned into ghost towns.”

Thirdly, some years before entering this place, I worked for the British Council as director of its St Petersburg office. I have seen at first hand the nature of the Putin regime. I was withdrawn from Russia owing to concerns about my personal security, after the Kremlin's campaign of intimidation in the wake of the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko. Just remember that. This is a regime that responds to having been caught red handed murdering a British citizen on British soil using nuclear material with denial, aggression and intimidation. My experiences in Russia convinced me of the need to retain our nuclear deterrent. We must be able to stand up to bullies.

We live in an unstable and unpredictable world. We know that expansionist, belligerent regimes such as the one currently governing Russia thrive in such conditions. The Russian Government have pressed forward with the development of the Dolgorukiy ballistic missile submarine and the next generation of cruise missiles. This is not the type of missile that we can hope James Bond will sneak in and disarm. The threat represented by this type of weapon can be prevented only through deterrence. Nuclear weapons exist precisely so that we will never have to use them.

I would dearly like to live in a world without nuclear weapons, but we must engage with the world as it is, not how we would like it to be. We must be realists, not fantasists. Deterrence has kept the peace for over 70 years. To give up the capacity for independent action would not only expose us to nuclear blackmail but severely weaken our standing in the world. So I ask all hon. Members to stand up for Britain when they enter the Division Lobby this evening and to join me in supporting the motion.

8.54 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): In November, the UK Government published the latest strategic defence and security review. At that time, scant assessment was made of the defence and security implications of Brexit. This can now only be interpreted as both naive and irresponsible. Eight months later and Parliament is being asked to forge ahead with defence spending policies based on the assumption that nothing has changed. But everything has changed: our relationship with Europe; the UK's role in the world; even the Prime Minister and much of the Cabinet. Surely now, with such a fundamental shift in national strategy and circumstances, the time has come to revisit at least the principles of the defence spending review.

This commitment—I use last November's costings—would tie up at least one third of the defence procurement budget, year on year, for the next 20 years. Questioning the wisdom of squandering huge sums on four Successor submarines is not a matter of being soft on defence; it is a matter of acknowledging the hard reality of a post-Brexit economy, of security threats utterly unlike those of the cold war, of technological advances and of the need to reassess the United Kingdom's place in the world.

Surely now is the time for investment in defending against those threats that will be with us for decades to come, and surely there must be a priority for defence cyber-security. November's spending review championed the national cyber-security plan, which has been allocated £1.9 billion for the next four years, yet the greatest part of this plan is to address civilian cybercrime, and only £90 million is specifically allocated to defence cyber.

We know that our conventional armed forces are under strength and ill equipped, and as Chilcot noted, such deficiencies put our soldiers in danger when deployed in danger zones. A national newspaper reported yesterday that the Army is placing under-trained recruits in front-line roles. Conventional forces, working in tandem with international law, can deliver peace and stability through peacekeeping. Trident can never do that.

I understand that the Prime Minister visited Wales today and had meetings with the Labour First Minister, Carwyn Jones. I understand that my nation's role in Brexit negotiations was discussed, and I understand that they discussed the future of the Union. The future of Scotland's presence in the Union is now very much in question. Only a couple of years ago, Labour's First Minister offered a warm welcome to Trident in Pembrokeshire at the prospect of just such an eventuality. Under pressure from his own Assembly Members, he backed off, but he will be encouraged by Labour Back Benchers today. My country has suffered the legacy of industrial decay and suffered at the hands of the poverty of Welsh Labour's economic ambition and the poverty of its vision for Wales. But we will not accept the mantra of "jobs at any cost."

If Trident leaves Faslane, the Westminster Government will need to find a base in England, because we are not so poor in spirit as to accept the toxic status symbol of Britain's imagined standing on the world stage. The security of Wales is dependent on the security of the global community, not on antiquated technology. My Plaid Cymru colleagues and I will vote against this motion.

8.57 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Too often today we have heard that Trident is classed as the ultimate deterrent. Yet the great warmonger, Tony Blair, is already on record as saying that it is a status symbol that "serves no military purpose". What it means is that some others aspire to have that status symbol. We do not argue that we need to stockpile chemical and biological weapons to deter rogue states, so why do we argue that we need nuclear weapons? If we encourage a reckless gambler to play poker, he will not be afraid to go "all in" with his chips, so why do we argue that we should risk nuclear Armageddon as a possible deterrent? That is not the way to go. The only country ever to have suffered a nuclear attack is Japan, and it has never felt the need to get a nuclear weapon as a deterrent against a future attack. Instead, Japan makes the clear and logical argument that we need to rid the world of nuclear weapons.

The new Successor submarines, we have heard, will cost approximately £200 billion, yet they will not even protect us from the tier 1 threats identified in the 2015
For me, it is incomprehensible to have a review that leads to 35% of the defence capital allocation going to a tier 2 threat when at least six higher-ranked risks were identified in the SDSR. Of these tier 1 threats, it is clear that Trident does not protect us from terrorism or from cyber-attacks for which the nuclear systems will be a top target. Some of the arguments we have heard today, such as that nuclear weapons guarantee us peace, are pieces of nonsense.

The argument for job creation, at a cost of £200 billion, is also nonsensical. If we are to believe the figure from the Ministry of Defence, 31,000 jobs will be created over the lifetime of Trident. At £6.5 million per job, that is the most expensive job creation scheme in history. It is actually a job creation scheme in reverse, given that it is risking jobs in the Clyde shipyards, and other men in the conventional forces—in the Army and the Navy—are being paid off to subsidise Trident.

What could we do with that money? We could spend more on renewables fabrication. We could engage in oil exploration off the west coast of Scotland, which nuclear subs have prevented. There would be alternative shipbuilding possibilities. We could invest in carbon capture and storage, and stimulate coal mining again. There could be infrastructure upgrades, and specific regeneration funding for the communities in which losses might be felt most.

Labour Members keep saying that they are worried about losing their heartlands. One of the appealing aspects of the leave vote was the fact that extra money could be spent on the national health service. Labour Members could now go to those heartlands and argue that £2.4 billion annual cost of Trident—that is £50 million a week—could be spent on the NHS. Labour Members have also said that the argument against Trident was lost in the 1980s, but the SNP have won elections in 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2016 on an anti-Trident platform. Given the Labour party’s internal nuclear warfare, we will go on winning in Scotland: that is a fact.

Part of the thrust of today’s debate has been worry about rogue states. I must say, and I want to put this on the record, that I also worry about the possibility of a Donald Trump, or one of the wannabe Prime Ministers in the Conservative party—the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), or the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox)—getting his hands on the red button. As Billy Connolly said, you wouldn’t trust them with a TV remote control, let alone that red button.

Let me end by quoting some lines from a song that I listened to last night:

“Cos when the madman flips the switch
The nuclear will go for me.”

Those lines come from “The Lunatics Have Taken Over The Asylum”. Nothing has changed since 1981, when it was written, and we certainly should not be signing a blank cheque for Trident.

9.1 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Over our recent history, Parliament has held many debates about the decision to send our armed forces into combat on our behalf. Throughout those important discussions, a single principle has united all Members of Parliament: the requirement to protect human life, and specifically to act at all times to minimise the impact of violent conflict on civilians. In modern times, that principle has been accepted by all parties and each individual Government in every theatre of combat.

In January 2004, the then Armed Forces Minister said, in relation to the Iraq war,

“We regard any loss of life as deeply regrettable and we take our obligations to avoid or minimise casualties extremely seriously. Steps to avoid such casualties are integrated into every aspect of military operations.”—[Official Report, 7 January 2004; Vol. 416, c. 141WH.]

That approach has been adopted by successive Governments. In November 2010, the current Secretary of State for International Trade, then Secretary of State for Defence, said:

“The prevention of civilian casualties was of paramount concern to force commanders operating in Iraq and the risk of this occurring was minimised at all times by the tactics and training of our forces.”—[Official Report, 3 November 2010; Vol. 517, c. 847W]

The same approach has been underlined by the current Government. In October 2014, the present Secretary of State for Defence, who is in the Chamber, explained how the strategy underlined our current combat operations, saying that

“the United Kingdom seeks to avoid civilian casualties.”—[Official Report, 20 October 2014; Vol. 586, c. 668.]

Let us be clear. It is a long-standing doctrine that we should seek to take all possible precautions to minimise the killing of civilians in conflict. That moral objective has formed an integral part of our military planning, and our armed forces are specifically trained in tactics that reinforce the commitment. It is that moral standpoint that has led the United Kingdom to join other countries in banning items such as chemical and biological weapons and cluster bombs. I agree with the approach, but just how does it square with Trident? I do not accept that this debate should take place in an ethical vacuum. Indiscriminate death on an unimaginable scale is the cold reality of nuclear war. It is literally unthinkable. The use of nuclear weapons would be a disaster for our planet and for our civilisation.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: No, I will not.

The use of nuclear weapons would not only make us the exception to the rule in the international community, but run counter to every single pronouncement that has ever been made by every post-war Government about the UK military’s terms of engagement. We have heard today that this Government and those on the Opposition Benches are prepared to support the renewal of Trident whatever the cost. That word “whatever” has borne very heavily upon this Chamber, not least in the context of the last week. It is not about “whatever.” Whatever the consequences? Whatever the cost? No, it cannot be about that; it is immoral, it is defunct, we should not be supporting it, and I will support my colleagues on the SNP Benches as we vote against the renewal of Trident this evening.
Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I come to this debate this evening along with my two colleagues in the Social Democratic and Labour party as pacifists—as people who strongly believe in nuclear disarmament and firmly believe that Trident and weapons of mass destruction are used to kill people in a very indiscriminate manner. For that reason, we will be going into the No Lobby tonight.

What we are debating today is the UK’s own role as a nuclear power. In the last six years—the time I have spent in this House—I cannot recall having heard any Minister convincingly explain why the UK’s nuclear arsenal provides any deterrent not already provided by the much larger arsenals of the allies. I have yet to hear any reason why nuclear weapons make Britain safer than non-armed states like Germany, Canada and Japan. There is no genuine security argument for the UK to spend these vast sums of money on weapons that can never be used, because the elephant in the room today is that this is about status, not safety. The reason the Government want to renew these weapons is not because they make us safer; it is because Ministers are afraid that without them the UK will further cease to be a world power.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Like my hon. Friend, I detect that this is about status. This is a vanity project, and the most thoughtful argument we have heard for the investment in Trident is actually that its use would be unthinkable.

Ms Ritchie: I thank my hon. Friend for his very helpful intervention. In that respect, I remember going to a talk in this House some months ago given by the former Secretary of State for Defence Lord Browne, now in the other place, who said Trident was no longer applicable because of issues to do with cyber-security and detection.

I have even heard it suggested that renewing Trident is necessary to protect the UK’s place on the UN Security Council, but for a modern democracy weapons of mass destruction are no way to hold on to our place in the world. In truth, the calls to hold on to these weapons betray an insecurity that actually weakens the UK’s standing in the world. How can the UK call on other countries to commit to non-proliferation when it is not afraid to do so? And what is the reasoning behind the much larger arsenals of the allies? I have yet to hear a single reason for replacement.

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Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I have listened for the last few hours to the various arguments on Trident, but I have not yet heard a single new and compelling case for its replacement. I have heard that it will have a blank cheque and I have heard that there are a lot of unknown unknowns about the future, but we still have not been given a single reason for replacement.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I am therefore going to turn to the words of a survivor of a nuclear holocaust who came here a few months ago, Setsuko Thurlow, who is 84 years old. She could be our mother, our grandmother, our aunt or our sister. She told us that in the final year of war in Japan, when she was 13 years old, the first thing she remembers of the bomb hitting was a blue-white light and her body being thrown up into the air. She was in a classroom of 14-year-olds, every one of whom died; she was the only survivor. As the dust settled and she crawled out of that building, she made out some figures walking towards her. She described them as walking ghosts, and when she got to them, she made out red skin falling off them, and others still were carrying limbs. One was carrying their eyeballs in their hands. So when I hear the Prime Minister today say that she would be satisfied to press the button on hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women and children, I ask her to go and see Setsuko Thurlow—I am sure she would be delighted to have a discussion about what it is really like to experience a nuclear bomb. That in itself should be the complete reason why we do not replace Trident.

My second story takes me back a couple of years, when I was campaigning for Scottish independence, as were all my colleagues. During the campaign, I used a 1950s green goddess fire engine called the “Spirit of Independence”. Hon. Members may not know that the green goddesses were built as vehicles to protect people in the event of a nuclear strike, but were discontinued in 2003 because they had not been used and would have been utterly useless—they were never replaced. They had a top speed of 45 mph, so if a nuclear strike happened nearby—for example, 30 miles from Glasgow—they would have been completely useless.
I am outlining two short and simple reasons why we need to consider the end of this programme. Houses need building, and there are many jobs in defence diversification, renewable energies and many other industries for the highly skilled people working on Trident. A million people go to food banks every year. We should hang our heads in shame at even the possible thought of sacrificing all—

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con) indicated dissent.

Chris Law: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head, but he needs to listen to the facts. People are going hungry in this country, and people are going without jobs and are suffering. He may think that this status symbol is the most important thing, but I will not support it tonight and of course neither will my colleagues.

9.13 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): To start with, it is a disgrace, and it is contemptuous of this Parliament, that we are being asked to take not just the biggest spending decision of this Parliament, but the biggest strategic defence decision probably of our lifetime on the basis of 14 lines of text; there is no plan, no budget and no security assessment, beyond a glib assertion that the world is going to be a very dangerous place in 30 years’ time and we have to do something. I really do not think that is good enough. Yet again and as with many other things, this is presented here today, at this time and in this way, not for the benefit of the country, but for the benefit of the Conservative party, and that is disgraceful.

There has been much talk about deterrence, but—despite our questioning—no one has been able to tell us who or what has been deterred by our nuclear capability over the past 50 years. It certainly did not deter North Korea from getting nuclear weapons and it certainly has not deterred the misery and despotism in the middle east. In fact, it has been suggested that the only thing our possession of nuclear weapons will do is deter others from using theirs in a conflict because of the consequences.

That brings us to the morality of the entire question. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), I was dismayed by the Prime Minister’s glib answer when he quizzed her on whether she would press the nuclear button. I say to the Prime Minister and to all those who support her motion tonight that they need to take a long, hard look in the mirror. They need to search their hearts and their consciences. They need to explain what kind of morality can justify the mass execution of non-combatants.

Mr Kevan Jones: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. He is making the moral argument against nuclear weapons, which I respect even though I disagree with it. Can he tell me why his party is prepared to join the nuclear alliance in NATO, sign up to the nuclear doctrine and accept a place under the nuclear umbrella when it is not prepared for this country to make a contribution?

Tommy Sheppard: As I was saying, we have to ask ourselves whether we are prepared to see the mass execution of non-combatants. Is it right to have the genocide of innocents? Unless the hon. Gentleman and the other people who support this motion can answer those questions in the affirmative, there is no deterrent at all and it should not exist.

Mr Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: He has already intervened.

I want to say to colleagues on the Labour Benches who have spoken in favour of the Conservative Government’s position that I very much regret that they seem to be hiding behind the defence trade unions in justifying how they will vote tonight. Surely they do not have to be very smart to understand that if we do not start this rearmament and do not commit this £200 billion, we will have enough money to give a financial guarantee to every worker in that industry and to redeplo their ingenuity, skills and experience into construction and engineering projects that would be for the benefit of humankind rather than for its destruction. I would have thought that the Labour party argued for that, but it has lost its moral compass on this and many other issues, which is why it is in its present situation.

I was elected to this Chamber on a manifesto, but this issue was not buried somewhere on page 13. Every leaflet that I put out during that campaign had the words “No Trident” in 24-point type. In every election address that I made, I told the electors that I would vote against this proposed rearmament at every opportunity. I was elected with 49.2% of the vote.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my utter dismay at the fact that the House is considering Trident renewal when civic Scotland, the Churches, the Scottish Trades Union Congress and MPs here and in the Scottish Parliament are all so firmly against having Trident on our soil?

Tommy Sheppard: I do indeed.

I was about to say that the people who came second and third in my seat at the election also agreed with the position that I take here today. In fact, more than 80% of the Scottish population voted in that election for political parties that oppose the proposition before us. That should be a problem for the Government. How can it be, when one nation in this United Kingdom is so absolutely against the proposition, that that nation and no one else gets vested with the delivery of the system and all the security consequences that come with it? If the Defence Secretary is so keen on this project, he might want to consider the construction of a naval base somewhere on the coast of Kent. He would then be able to have all the nuclear submarines he wanted without our condemnation.

Finally—I say this in response to the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones)—in such stand-offs, somebody somewhere has to put the gun down first. The alternative to rearmament and the creation of a more dangerous world is a process of disarmament to provide an example and the building of international alliances that will make our world safer. After all, that is our exact strategy on chemical or biological warfare so why not with nuclear weapons, too? The SNP will vote against this proposition tonight, and I hope that colleagues on the Labour Benches will search their hearts and come with us into the Lobby.
9.23 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Tonight I will vote against the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons system and will join my SNP colleagues—the vast majority of Scottish MPs—in doing so. My opposition is based on three clear principles: the ridiculously high cost, its outdated ineffectiveness, and the morality of renewing a nuclear weapons system that we want to see the back of.

The new Trident system will cost in the region of £200 billion over the project’s lifetime. At a time when we are telling disabled people that we cannot afford to continue paying their £30 a week employment support payments, when we are telling the WASPI women that we cannot afford proper transitional payments on their pensions and when this Government accept that food banks, on which 1.1 million people rely, are just part of the social security system, we have to question extraordinarily large items of spending, so we must certainly question the affordability of Trident. In the wake of the damning Chilcot report into the Iraq war, in which we read about how ill equipped our soldiers were for that theatre, perhaps some of the £205 billion would be better spent on our under-equipped but actually used conventional forces, on restoring recently cut areas of defence or even perhaps on some jets to go on the aircraft carrier that we just built without having any planes to use on it.

We have to consider the effectiveness and practicality of the system. Even the new Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), recently said that holding nuclear weapons makes a state a target. Nuclear weapons are ineffective and useless as a deterrent against the modern threats we face. We cannot threaten cyber-criminals or the terror groups that we fight with a nuclear bomb. Climate change is not tempered by nuclear weapons. None of those era-defining threats to our way of life and to our safety and security are protected by the mutual assured destruction of nuclear weapons. Some of the support for Trident reminds me of the arms race that led to the first world war. Each power was trying to outgun the others in order to avoid war when all they were really doing was making war inevitable. It is claimed that Trident is the ultimate deterrent, but if it is a deterrent at all, it is a deterrent against the wars and threats of the past.

Finally, on morality, each of the nuclear missiles carried by the submarines has about eight times the power of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, which caused absolute destruction. Imagine the destruction caused by just one of those warheads and then remember that each submarine carries forty. We must remember that nuclear weapons cannot be targeted; they are all about complete obliteration. They obliterate innocent men, women and children, which should be abhorred. While such weapons remain in our possession, there is a risk of them being used, which we cannot comprehend or countenance.

Trident is a cold war weapons system. It is outdated, immoral and extortionately expensive. Taking humanity, defence and our economy into account, we simply cannot afford to renew Trident tonight.

9.23 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Our new Prime Minister’s main priority has been laid bare less than a week after she took office. It is not to address the shambolic management of the NHS, the shameful proliferation of food banks across the UK, or an economy and currency on the edge of a dangerous precipice; her main priority is to spend billions on a new generation of weapons of mass destruction with the decision hurriedly forced through this place. We do not even know the full cost of renewal. Without knowing something as basic as how much it will cost, how is there any chance of proper scrutiny?

The new Prime Minister made much of her visit to Scotland last week. She was there to push her case for our so-called special Union. What is really special about this Union is the absolute lack of parity of esteem. Tonight 58 of Scotland’s 59 democratically elected Members of Parliament will vote down this renewal. Thanks to our special Union, in which our larger neighbour dictates all terms of the relationship, the vote looks set to pass. This Government, with no mandate in Scotland, will force Scotland to be unwilling accomplices in their nuclear obsession. When we voice our disapproval, we are told to shut up and be thankful for the jobs. How many redundancies have taken place across the public sector in the past few years because, according to our former Chancellor, we need


Just how many more jobs could be created if we did not prioritise nuclear weapons over schools, hospitals, infrastructure and our conventional defence forces? While a bottomless pit of cash appears to be available for nukes, it is a source of great shame for all of us that we cannot afford to ensure that our military personnel are properly treated. One in 10 rough sleepers is a former service member. Sent off to fight wars in foreign countries, these ex-service personnel are denied the support that they deserve on their return from conflict. Although I commend the work of charitable organisations such as Soldiers Off The Street and Help for Heroes, it is nothing short of a national disgrace that they need to exist in the first place. These troops are prepared to put their lives on the line for our safety and we are not prepared to resource them, to look after them in service or to look after them on their return.

It is immoral to allow our soldiers to sleep rough on the streets; immoral to impose brutal welfare reform on the most vulnerable in society; immoral to watch the health service suffer from the ideology of a Government hell-bent on reform; and immoral to watch as food banks multiply exponentially. It is utterly immoral to spend billions on weapons that we will never, ever use and to place such a galling financial priority on them. The Prime Minister has made her priorities clear. Whether or not all my constituents agree with me on the issue of Trident, I am prioritising every one of them by voting against this new generation of weapons of mass destruction this evening.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There are quite a lot of noisy private conversations taking place, including by hon. Members who have already addressed the House, and it is frankly rather discourteous to those who are waiting to do so.
Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The case against renewing Trident is quite simple and plain to us on the SNP Benches and to the vast majority of the people of Scotland, the Scottish Parliament, Scotland’s MPs and MSPs, and Scotland’s churches and civic society. Despite that, the Government and most of those in the Labour party, as it thrashes about in its death throes, are willing to press ahead with these grotesque plans. To spend up to £205 billion on the lifetime cost of replacement is simply immoral.

When we look around us, we see families struggling to make ends meet, even when the parents are working full time. We see women who have had the opportunity to retire cruelly snatched away from them, leaving them to work up to an extra six years to access the pension to which they contributed all their working lives. We see austerity biting into Scotland’s budget and budgets across the UK, as local services creak under the weight of cuts, cuts and more cuts. We see a new Prime Minister who, as her first priority, is apparently seeking to renew Trident at a time of austerity and real economic uncertainty following the Brexit vote. These weapons of mass destruction will cost billions of pounds. The people of Scotland and the people of the UK do not want them, do not need them and could never use them. The context of this decision is that debt, deficit and borrowing levels are forecast to get worse after Brexit, with more than £40 billion to be cut from public services by 2020. This is an absolute disgrace.

Let us look at the so-called security argument for Trident. It protects us from our enemies by providing a deterrent, we are told. Which enemies? Do we have any enemies that pose such a threat to us that we would destroy an entire continent to punish them? It makes us feel safe, we are told. Really? Tell that to Israel, which has nuclear weapons. Does anyone believe that those living in Israel feel secure? The biggest threat to our security is from terrorism. Trident does not protect us from that; in fact, it makes us a target. Does anyone seriously think that terrorists who are willing to wrap themselves in explosives and walk into a restaurant to detonate them will be deterred by Trident? That is the most likely and, most worryingly, the most common threat that we face in the new world order.

It is time for the UK Government to stop trying to strut around the world measuring the size of its warheads against the size of other countries’ warheads. As for the argument that we need to renew Trident because of jobs, perhaps the trade union baron Len McCluskey should take that matter up with his counterparts in the Scottish Trades Union Congress. A report has shown that many of the skills used by Scottish workers could be transferred. To argue that Trident is important because of jobs is like saying that we should not find a cure for cancer for fear that cancer surgeons may be unemployed. We need to get a moral grip. Trident cannot be justified morally, financially or economically. That is why its supporters cannot win in Scotland.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Three remaining hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye, and the Front-Bench winding-up speeches must begin at 9.40 pm. Three colleagues from the same party can, I am sure, be sufficiently collegiate to work it out for themselves.
support equipment is a luxury. I do not want to live in a country where we have nothing to offer our children but excuses and crafted worded answers when they see huge companies telling us they have paid their way, when in fact they have hidden accounts all over the world. I do not want this country to accept that families should need to go to a food bank to eat something in the evening when their kids come home from school. No one can say that is fair. No one can say that is acceptable.

In this Parliament—right here, right now—we have a choice: we can stand up and say, “No more. Not in our name.” No more will we stand by while the Government and their supporters, and often even the Opposition, walk the other way and plan to spend our money on something abhorrent, obscene and completely unnecessary in our modern world.

What could we do with £200 billion? That money could bring change. Tonight, the families I mentioned deserve change. They deserve better. They deserve a fairer future. They deserve to eat tonight, to be comforted, to be safe and to feel that they are part of our society and that we care about them. They have the right to opportunity and to an education, as far as they want to take it. They have the right to expect that this country, with all its wealth, status and opportunity, can move beyond insane projections of power and can care for its own to change things for the better.

Our lives, and everything we do, are about change. They are about the future we want, not the future that others are accepting for us. We should start testing ourselves. That should not be about how we build technology that is capable of destruction and death at an indiscriminate and barbaric level. It should be about how we provide for those who have little or nothing—or, to put it another way, it is about bairns, not bombs.

9.36 pm

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): There is an absurd illogicality about this country’s debate over nuclear weapons. We are debating whether to spend upwards of £150 billion on a weapons system we will never fire because it is entirely redundant. Supporters of Trident would have us impoverish our grandchildren for an arsenal last effective in the 20th century.

Once upon a time, the enemy was clear: it was the Soviet Union. The balance of terror argument was equally clear: if Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev or Gorbachev threatened us with invasion, we had the capacity to murder millions of Warsaw pact citizens. However, those days are long gone. We cannot threaten nuclear annihilation against a Daesh death cult embedded in civilian areas, which is why the Defence Secretary struggled so badly this morning when asked to explain how Trident offered a defence against terrorism.

“But look at Mr Putin,” warn the nuclear apologists. “He might threaten us, and only Trident will stand in his way.” That argument is beyond absurd. Thus far, Putin has brutalised Chechnya, invaded Georgia, annexed part of Crimea and bombarded Syria—all against our will. He has a strategy as old as Russian foreign policy itself, and Britain’s nuclear fig leaf does not deter him one jot.

As Lord Bramall, the former Chief of the General Staff, put it, Trident, for “all practical purposes…has not and…would not deter any of the threats…likely to face this country in the foreseeable or…longer-term future.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 24 January 2013; Vol. 742, c. 1229.]

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The Government motion asks us to vote for a minimum credible nuclear deterrent. Would it not have been better if they had brought forward plans for minimum credible conventional forces, which strike me as much more pertinent?

John Nicolson: It would indeed, because our conventional forces have been starved of cash. We have no conventional ocean-going surface ships based in Scotland, despite frequent Russian intrusions into our waters. We have built aircraft carriers without aircraft to fly off them or the necessary surface ships and submarines for protection. We have complaints from senior armed forces officials about the lack of appropriate equipment for our soldiers on the ground—directly contributing to deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan, as described by Chilcot.

As Michael Clarke, director general of the Royal United Services Institute, puts it:

“The one thing that politicians don’t address when they talk about Britain’s nuclear weapons is how they do, or don’t, actually figure in practical defence policy for the next 10 or 20 years. It is really very depressing.”

We on the SNP Benches choose to defy that stereotype. We want to put logic at the heart of the UK’s defence policy. It is what our voters want; it is also what much of the military wants. Major General Sir Patrick Cordingley spells it out for the armchair generals who sit on the Government Benches, telling us that there is no purpose to it.

I appeal to my colleagues on the Labour Benches: vote with us. Follow your conscience; do not vote for a missile system that is the equivalent of a cavalry charge when the machine gun has already been introduced.

9.40 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Let me take this opportunity to welcome the Prime Minister to her role.

It is stating the obvious that opinion has been sharply divided in today’s debate, just as it is that that was exactly the Government’s intention. As the Chilcot report clearly demonstrated, when we make decisions of war and peace—of life and death—based on political posturing, assumptions and poor evidence, the results can be catastrophic. There are few decisions more important than the future security of our country and weapons that could kill millions, so I, like most Members, want to see a world without them.

The question, then, is how we achieve that while ensuring that we have a defensive capability that is fit and proper for the 21st century. My personal scepticism about the current proposal is based on concerns about military utility, economic cost and benefit, and whether it is part of a genuine multilateral approach. Many of my hon. Friends have pointed to the position agreed by the Labour party conference in making a perfectly reasonable argument for a continuous at-sea submarine-based nuclear capability, though I would add that the policy also acknowledged a multilateral path to ultimate disarmament. Since that conference decision, a review has been instigated. Perhaps more importantly, we must
[Clive Lewis]

take account of other developments, not least Brexit, in holding the Government to account today. The Government could have chosen to address that, and the other concerns that I and others have traditionally had, with clear answers; instead, they chose to divide rather than unite.

Let me be clear that I, for one, do not believe that this is about patriots versus pacificists, or who is moral or immoral. No matter what our differences, we all speak to what we think is best for our constituents and our country. That is certainly true of all Members who have contributed today. Many represent communities with a particular stake in this debate. I applaud, in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), whose tenacity in standing up for his own community’s interest is second to none.

We heard a great speech from the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), the knowledgeable Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, who described Trident renewal as a political weapon surplus to the needs of NATO. The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) quoted Bevin’s famous comments about the need for an independent nuclear capability. However, as Labour Members know, Nye Bevan said:

“It is…not a question of who is in favour of the…bomb, but…what is the most effective way of getting the damn thing destroyed.”

He too was a multilateralist. Meanwhile, the hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) invited us to come to his bedroom to see his large weapon—defence establishment at Aldermaston...

Last week I replied to the Secretary of State after his statement concerning the recent NATO summit. I spoke of NATO’s values: international co-operation; military force for defence, not aggression; mutualism and the sharing of risk; opposition to tyranny; and the defence of democracy. Those values are deeply held by Labour Members. It is no coincidence that two of NATO’s founding Governments were led by the new deal Democrats and the Labour party.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I do not want to interrupt the thread of my hon. Friend’s important argument, but may I bring him to the text of the motion and ask whether he shares my concern about the phrase, “for as long as the global security situation demands”?

We have just had the Chilcot report, which reminded us that we are not safe if we do not uphold international rules and obligations. I, for one, would be very glad to hear from the Defence Secretary, and from my hon. Friend, what concrete steps are going to be taken to uphold our commitment to multilateral disarmament.

Clive Lewis: I will come to that issue later in my speech, but the motion as it stands calls into question the Government’s integrity in holding up the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

Whereas the values that underpin NATO’s formation are timeless, the decision that the United Kingdom should build and maintain its own nuclear weapon system was a strategic military and political decision made on the basis of specific considerations at the time. Making a similar consideration is the task that falls to this House today. Unfortunately, the Government’s timing is wrong and they have fallen short of that objective.

The previous Prime Minister said that today’s vote was to “provide certainty”, but the Government motion does not do that, because it does not change anything. We simply have no more detail. Every indication is that this is a ploy that the Government repeat at will to avoid discussing critical issues. They then create the very uncertainty that they claim to be addressing. If that is not the case, the Secretary of State can very easily say so. There are no new costings in the motion. It used to be said that the Tories knew the value of nothing but the price of everything, but now they do not even know that. If there are any specific commitments to particular contracts, or if any are provided through today’s vote, perhaps the Secretary of State could list them.

The Government’s motion also asks us to endorse their record on multilateralism. Many of us in this House are serious about multilateralism as a policy, not a soundbite. What have this Government, as opposed to previous Administrations, actually done to promote multilateral measures since last year’s non-proliferation conference failed to reach agreement?

The line between unilateralists and multilateralists is too often exaggerated. Surely if we can agree that our goal is for a world free of nuclear weapons, the question is: how do we get there? International agreement is not impossible. The last Labour Government deserve great credit for their role in the international treaties on cluster munitions and landmines. We therefore ask the Government to show real leadership, focus on our shared goals and give us a vision of how we can achieve them.

The motion also considers Trident renewal in isolation from... rather than in the context of, defence policy as a whole. Only last week we discussed the Chilcot report. He recorded a catalogue of equipment failures and their human cost. I know what it is like to be under enemy fire, needing air support and being told that none is available. Conventional forces remain our first form of deterrence against Russian aggression, and they defended our territory the last time it was invaded, in the form of the Falklands.

We need urgent assurance that spending on our nuclear capability is not made at the expense of conventional military equipment. In the past six years, the MOD has seen its budget suffer a real-terms cut of 9%. The number of attack helicopters has been cut by 21%; frigates and destroyers by 17%; fighter aircraft by 25%; and main battle tanks by 41%. The size of the armed forces has been cut by a fifth, and the MOD civilian workforce seen its budget suffer a real-terms cut of 9%. The military equipment. In the past six years, the MOD has

Costs are critical. The MOD’s equipment plan has been left reeling by last month’s Brexit decision. That is not my conclusion, but that of the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy. The implications for the defence budget may be profound, but we have had no clarity from the Prime Minister today. Where is it? Will the Secretary of State please tell us what assurances he has that the defence budget will be maintained in real as well as proportional terms?

Similarly, the motion asks us to, in effect, endorse the Government’s defence industrial strategy. Let me be clear that we cannot allow the devastation that happened to industrial communities in the 1980s under Thatcher...
happen again. Retaining a workforce with specialist skills is a matter of military as well as economic security. Those points have been made very clearly today by many Opposition Members and by the GMB and Unite trade unions, but neither they nor I endorse the Government’s defence procurement policy as a whole.

On current trends, 25p in every defence procurement pound is forecast to go to America by 2020. Given the consequences of Brexit for the exchange rate with the dollar, this urgently needs to be reviewed. Just last week, the Government announced a multimillion-pound purchase of nine P-8As and 50 Apache helicopters from America. When will the Secretary of State share with this House the detail to assure us that the deal will, in fact, secure British jobs in the long term? It is the same story on steel. The Prime Minister’s earlier words fell well short of any guarantee about the Successor programme.

The security threats that we face are many and fast changing. There are serious issues worthy of serious consideration. We have heard a range of views from across the House, and rightly so, because this is a complex issue. The biggest shock to our security, for many, has been Brexit. That resulted not from the actions of our enemies, but from the complacency and arrogance of our former Prime Minister and his short-term political game playing.

I pay tribute particularly to the speech of the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who argued in favour of the motion, but equally to that of the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), who argued against it. I will also remember the speech of the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), which was based on the evidence. He started on the other side of the argument, he listened to the evidence and over the years he has changed his mind. I also pay tribute to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate, speculated that our submarines might somehow become obsolete through new technology, but that is not the case. Submarines are designed to operate in isolation, and it is hard to think of a system less susceptible to cyber-attack or one better protected in the hiding place that is the ocean. Those who query whether our submarines would remain protected against such attacks should consider why the United States, Russia, China and France are now spending tens of billions of pounds renewing their own submarine-based weapons.

Let me turn to the question I was asked about cost. Yes, the Successor submarines are a serious investment. The cost of building the four boats is £31 billion spread over the 35 years of their life, with a £10 billion contingency on top. The in-service costs remain unchanged at, on average, about 6% of the annual defence budget.

Angus Robertson: This is the last opportunity for the Secretary of State. Please will he tell the House before we vote this evening what the total through-life cost of Trident renewal is? What is it?

Michael Fallon: Many Members have been in this debate all day and will have heard me give the cost for building the four submarines and the proportion that the costs will take when the submarines are in service.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) and the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) asked about the delivery of the Successor programme. It will be managed by a
new delivery body for the procurement and in-service support of all nuclear submarines. That will ensure that, unlike in previous warship programmes, the submarines are delivered on time and on budget. If they are not, the principal contractors involved will suffer penalties as a result.

Finally, I was asked about disarmament. We certainly want to see a world free of nuclear weapons. We have made significant reductions to our nuclear forces. We have cut our nuclear stockpiles by over half since the end of cold war. I reduced the number of deployed warheads on each of our submarines from 48 to 40 last year, and we are continuing work to reduce our stockpile to no more than 180 warheads by the mid-2020s. We continue to play our part in talks through the non-proliferation treaty, and as has already been said, Britain has been leading the way in trying to get other countries to make progress, collectively, towards disarmament.

In conclusion, our continuous at-sea deterrent may have been born of the cold war, but it is no relic of the past. The cold war itself has been succeeded by a complex environment of emerging threats, rogue states and unpredictable non-state actors, some of whom have nuclear weapons, while others are intent on getting hold of them. Those threats will not disappear because we refuse to look at them. On the contrary, we must confront them head-on. We cannot predict the future, and we should not gamble with the long-term security of our citizens by assuming that no extreme threat will emerge while so many nuclear weapons remain. That is what this Government intend to do by replacing our Vanguard submarines to sustain the deterrent that has protected us successfully for so long.

As we contemplate this fundamental decision, I urge Members across the House to do what successive Governments have done and to do the right thing, not just for today, but for tomorrow, and vote to maintain our nuclear deterrent for as long as security conditions require it.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 472, Noes 117.

Division No. 46] [10 pm

**AYES**

Brine, Steve  
Brokenshire, rh James  
Bruce, Fiona  
Bryant, Chris  
Buckland, Robert  
Burnham, rh Andy  
Burns, Conor  
Burns, rh Sir Simon  
Burrowes, Mr David  
Burt, rh Alistair  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cairns, rh Alun  
Cameron, rh Mr David  
Campbell, rh Mr Alan  
Carmichael, Neil  
Carswell, Mr Douglas  
Cartlidge, James  
Cash, Sir William  
Caufield, Maria  
Chalk, Alex  
Chapman, Jenny  
Chishti, Rehman  
Chope, Mr Christopher  
Churchill, Jo  
Clark, rh Greg  
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth  
Cleverly, James  
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey  
Coaker, Vernon  
Coffey, Ann  
Coffey, Dr Thérèse  
Collins, Damian  
Colvile, Oliver  
Cooper, Julie  
Cooper, Rosie  
Cooper, rh Yvette  
Costa, Alberto  
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey  
Coyle, Neil  
Crabb, rh Stephen  
Creeagh, Mary  
Creasy, Stella  
Crouch, Tracey  
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Dakin, Nic  
Danczuk, Simon  
David, Wayne  
Davies, Byron  
Davies, Chris  
Davies, David T. C.  
Davies, Geraint  
Davies, Glyn  
Davies, Dr James  
Davies, Mims  
Davies, Philip  
Davis, rh Mr David  
De Piero, Gloria  
Dineage, Caroline  
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel  
Donelan, Michelle  
Dorries, Nadine  
Double, Steve  
Doughty, Stephen  
Dowd, William  
Dowd, Peter  
Dowden, Oliver  
Drax, Richard  
Dromey, Jack  
Drummond, Mr Flick  
Duddridge, James  
Dugher, Michael  
Duncan, rh Sir Alan  
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain  
Dunne, Mr Philip  
Eagle, Ms Angela  
Eagle, Maria  
Elliot, Julie  
Elliot, Tom  
Ellis, Michael  
Ellison, Jane  
Ellman, Mrs Louise  
Ellwood, Mr Tobias  
Elphicke, Charlie  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Graham  
Evans, Mr Nigel  
Evennett, rh Mr David  
Fabricant, Michael  
Fallon, rh Michael  
Farrelly, Paul  
Fernandes, Suella  
Field, rh Frank  
Field, rh Mark  
Fitzpatrick, Jim  
Fiellio, Robert  
Fletcher, Colleen  
Flint, rh Caroline  
Foster, Kevin  
Fovargue, Yvonne  
Fox, rh Dr Liam  
Fraincois, rh Mr Mark  
Frazer, Lucy  
Freeman, George  
Freer, Mike  
Fuller, Richard  
Furniss, Gill  
Fysh, Marcus  
Gale, Sir Roger  
Gapes, Mike  
Garner, rh Sir Edward  
Garnier, Mark  
Gauke, rh Mr David  
Ghani, Nusrat  
Gibb, Mr Nick  
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl  
Glass, Pat  
Glen, John  
Glindon, Mary  
Goldsmith, Zac  
Goodwill, Mr Robert  
Gove, rh Michael  
Graham, Richard  
Grant, Mrs Helen  
Gray, Mr James  
Grayling, rh Chris  
Green, Chris  
Green, rh Damian  
Green, Kate  
Greening, rh Justine  
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic  
Griffiths, Andrew  
Gummer, rh Ben  
Gwynne, Andrew  
Gymah, Mr Sam  
Hallon, rh Robert  
Hall, Luke  
Hammond, rh Mr Philip  
Hammond, Stephen  
Hancock, rh Matt  
Hands, rh Greg  
Hanson, rh Mr David  
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
On 18 July 2016, the UK全国人民代表大会 voted in favor of retaining the UK's nuclear deterrent. The voting was as follows:

**Ayes:**
- Leslie, Chris
- Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
- Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
- Lewis, Brandon
- Lewis, rh Dr Julian
- Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
- Liddington, rh Mr David
- Lilley, rh Mr Peter
- Lopresti, Jack
- Lord, Jonathan
- Loughton, Tim
- Lucas, Ian C.
- Lumley, Karen
- Lynch, Holly
- Mackinlay, Craig
- Mackintosh, David
- Madders, Justin
- Mahfood, Mr Khalid
- Mahfood, Shabana
- Main, Mrs Anne
- Mak, Mr Alan
- Malhotra, Seema
- Malthouse, Kit
- Mann, John
- Mann, Mr Scott
- Mars, Rh
- Matheson, Christian
- Mathias, Dr Tania
- May, rh Mrs Theresa
- Maynard, Paul
- McCabe, Steve
- McCarthy, Kerry
- McCartney, Jason
- McCartney, Karl
- McDonagh, Siobhain
- McFadden, rh Mr Pat
- McGinn, Connor
- McGovern, Alison
- Mcllnes, Liz
- McKinnell, Catherine
- McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
- McCurdy, Stephen
- Menzies, Mark
- Mercer, Johnny
- Merriman, Huw
- Metcalfe, Stephen
- Miliband, rh Edward
- Miller, rh Mrs Maria
- Milling, Amanda
- Milns, Nigel
- Milton, rh Anne
- Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
- Moon, Mrs Madeleine
- Mordaunt, Penny
- Morden, Jessica
- Morgan, rh Nicky
- Morris, Anne Marie
- Morris, Liz
- Morris, James
- Morton, Wendy
- Mowat, David
- Mundell, rh David
- Murray, Mrs Sheryll
- Murison, Dr Andrew
- Neil, Robert
- Newton, Sarah
- Nokes, Caroline
- Norman, Jesse
- Nuttall, Mr David
- Olford, Dr Matthew
- Onn, Melanie
- Onwurah, Chi
- Opperman, Guy
- Osborne, rh Mr George
- Owen, Albert
- Paisley, Ian
- Parish, Neil
- Patel, rh Priti
- Paterson, rh Mr Owen
- Pawsey, Mark
- Penning, rh Mike
- Pennycook, Matthew
- Penrose, John
- Percy, Andrew
- Perkins, Toby
- Perry, Claire
- Phillips, Jess
- Phillips, Stephen
- Phillipson, Bridget
- Philp, Chris
- Pickles, rh Sir Eric
- Pincher, Christopher
- Poultér, Dr Daniel
- Pow, Rebecca
- Powell, Lucy
- Prentis, Victoria
- Prisk, rh Mr Mark
- Pritchard, Mark
- Pursglove, Tom
- Quin, Jeremy
- Quince, Will
- Redwood, rh John
- Reed, Mr Jamie
- Reed, Mr Steve
- Rees, Christina
- Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
- Reeves, Rachel
- Reynolds, Jonathan
- Robertson, rh Mr Laurence
- Robinson, Gavin
- Robinson, rh Mr Geoffrey
- Robinson, Mary
- Rosindell, Andrew
- Rudd, rh Amber
- Rutley, David
- Ryan, rh Joan
- Sandbach, Antoinette
- Scully, Paul
- Selous, Andrew
- Shannon, Jim
- Shapps, rh Grant
- Sharma, Alok
- Sharma, Mr Virendra
- Sheerman, rh Mr Barry
- Shellbrooke, Alec
- Sherriff, Paula
- Shuker, Mr Gavin
- Simpson, David
- Simpson, rh Mr Keith
- Skidmore, Chris
- Slaughter, Andy
- Smeth, Ruth
- Smith, Angela
- Smith, Chloe
- Smith, Henry
- Smith, Julian
- Smith, Nick
- Smith, Owen
- Smith, Rhodiana
- Smyth, Karin
- Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
- Solloway, Amanda
- Soubry, rh Anna
- Spellar, rh Mr John
- Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
- Spencer, Mark
- Starmer, Keir
- Stephenson, Andrew
- Stevenson, John
- Stewart, Bob
- Stewart, rh Iain
- Stewart, Rory
- Streeter, Mr Gary
- Streeting, Wes
- Stride, Mel
- Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
- Stuart, Graham
- Sturdy, Julian
- Sunak, rishi
- Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
- Swire, rh Mr Hugo
- Symys, Mr Robert
- Tami, Mark
- Thomas, Derek
- Thomas, Mr Gareth
- Thomas-Symonds, Nick
- Throup, Maggie
- Timms, rh Stephen
- Timpson, Edward
- Tolhurst, Kelly
- Tomlinson, Justin
- Tomlinson, Michael
- Tracey, Craig
- Tredinnick, David
- Trevelyan, Mr Anne-Marie
- Truss, rh Elizabeth
- Tugendhat, Tom
- Turley, Anna
- Turner, Mr Andrew
- Turner, Karl
- Twigg, Stephen
- Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
- Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
- Vara, Mr Shaihesh
- Vaz, Valerie
- Vickers, Martin
- Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
- Walker, Mr Charles
- Walker, Mr Robin
- Wallace, Mr Ben
- Warburton, David
- Warman, Matt
- Watson, Mr Tom
- Whaton, James
- Whately, Helen
- Wheeler, Heather
- White, Chris
- Whittaker, Craig
- Whittingdale, rh Mr John
- Wiggin, Bill
- Williams, Craig
- Williamson, rh Gavin
- Wilson, Phil
- Wilson, Mr Rob
- Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
- Wollaston, Dr Sarah
- Wood, Mike
- Woodcock, John
- Wragg, William
- Wright, Mr Iain
- Wright, rh Jeremy
- Zahawi, Nadhim

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

Stephen Barclay and Jackie Doyle-Price
for over 60 years, and for as long as the global security situation and posture, will remain essential to the UK’s security today as it has since 1948. Recognising the importance of the Government’s commitment to reducing its overall nuclear weapon stockpile by the mid-2020s; and supporting the Government’s commitment to continue work towards a safer and more stable world, pressing for key steps towards multilateral disarmament.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

ENTERPRISE

That the draft Pubs Code etc. Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 13 June, be approved.—(Christopher Pincher.) Question agreed to.

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, St Helens, Sefton and Wirral Combined Authority (Election of Mayor) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 8 June, be approved.—(Christopher Pincher.) Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Kelvin Hopkins be discharged from the European Scrutiny Committee and Kate Green be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Valerie Vaz be discharged from the Science and Technology Committee and Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

WELSH AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Carolyn Harris be discharged from the Welsh Affairs Committee and Chris Elmore be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

Mr Speaker: I now ask the Whip to move the motion for the Adjournment.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman was rather late in rising—I had already started to put the question—but I will let him off on this occasion. He is a callow youth. We will deal with him.
Dr Lewis: I am much obliged to you, Mr Speaker. I wonder whether it is within the rules of order for me to point out that on 14 March 2007, when the “initial gate” vote on Trident took place, the majority was 248, whereas this evening it has risen to 355.

Mr Speaker: Well, some people might think that it was the Lewis effect.

The right hon. Gentleman was not orderly in doing that, but he has done it.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.— (Christopher Pincher.)

10.21 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 19 July 2016

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Mr Speaker: I must inform the House that I have received written notification from the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), and from the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), of their wish to resign from the Chair following their ministerial appointments. In accordance with Standing Order No. 122C, I therefore declare that the Chairs of those two Committees are vacant. I shall announce the arrangements for the elections to those two posts as soon as practicable. I hope that it will be possible to hold those elections during the September sitting.

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

EU Referendum: Economic Situation

1. Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the (a) extent of and (b) economic effect of assets and capital being moved out of the UK as a result of the outcome of the EU referendum.

2. Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): What steps he is taking to update the Government’s long-term economic plan in response to the outcome of the EU referendum.

7. Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the near-term effect of the outcome of the EU referendum on economic confidence and growth in the UK.

8. Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the economic effect of the outcome of the EU referendum.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): While it is clear that the referendum decision represents a shock to the UK economy, thanks to the actions taken over the past six years by my predecessor, the economy is well placed to respond. I will work closely with the Bank of England to provide immediate stability and to maintain confidence in the fundamental health of the UK economy as we prepare for the autumn statement. As further post-referendum economic data are published, the economy’s short-term response to the Brexit decision will become clearer. If further measures are required, they will be announced in the autumn statement.

Philip Boswell: Given colleagues’ anecdotal evidence of capital flight, the recent vote to leave the EU has plunged the economy into volatility and uncertainty. The Conservative Government have been slow to act and have yet to provide an economic strategy, so will the Chancellor tell the people of the UK when they will get an insight into the scale of capital flight following the Brexit vote?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the shock of the exit vote at the referendum has created short-term turbulence in the UK economy, but we are well placed to manage it. In answer to his question about data, a series of data publications during the late summer and autumn will inform a proper response at the autumn statement.

Owen Thompson: The Conservative Government’s so-called long-term economic plan has resulted in their failing on key economic indicators and missing the targets that they set for themselves. Will the Chancellor tell the Chamber whether we will witness an end to this disastrous era of austerity?

Mr Hammond: The UK continues to run a very large fiscal deficit by international standards and we will have to address that deficit. We have already announced that we will no longer seek to bring the budget into balance by 2019-20, but that does not mean that we can go forward without a clear framework for achieving fiscal balance over an appropriate timeframe. We will address that issue in the autumn statement.

Ian Blackford: I welcome the new Chancellor to his place and wish him all good luck—for all our sakes, he is going to need it. A Deloitte survey of 132 FTSE 350 chief financial officers found that nearly two thirds of them expect revenues to fall. As the Financial Times puts it, business confidence is now lower than at the time of the collapse of Lehman, with 82% of companies expected to reduce capital spending. This crisis has been caused by Brexit. What tangible steps will the Chancellor take to restore confidence? Don’t just give us waffle—give us real plans.

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right; the figures that he quotes are right. The evidence is anecdotal in the early stages, as he would expect. As he would also expect, the initial response to this kind of shock must be a monetary response delivered by the Bank of England. In announcing that interest rates were not to be lowered in the early stages, as he would expect. As he would also expect, the initial response to this kind of shock must be a monetary response delivered by the Bank of England. In announcing that interest rates were not to be lowered in the early stages, as he would expect. As he would also expect, the initial response to this kind of shock must be a monetary response delivered by the Bank of England.
“determination of what comes next for technology will not be decided in Britain any more, but in Japan.”

Why does the Chancellor think that the company’s founder is wrong?

Mr Hammond: I suspect that the founder of the company has not had the benefit of discussions with the acquiring company. I have met the leader of the current management team, who are wholeheartedly supporting the purchase by SoftBank. We have achieved some very hard guarantees—these were volunteered without our having to extract them—about the future autonomy of the company, headquartered in the UK, and about its commitment to double the number of UK employees over the next five years. What became very clear from a discussion with the founder and CEO of SoftBank is that it firmly believes Cambridge will be the global centre for developing the internet of things and ARM will play a key role in developing that industry.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): I warmly welcome the Chancellor to his new role. It is probably the job he always wanted—unless of course he wants eventually to move next door. I note that to most questions so far he has said he is going to wait until the autumn statement, so I am hoping I get an answer to this one a bit earlier. Sticking to the fiscal surplus rule has rightly been scrapped by the previous Chancellor, and the automatic stabilisers have been allowed to kick in. The higher deficit implied by that decision will have to be plugged sooner or later. From 2010, the Chancellor’s predecessor planned an 80% consolidation of that to come from spending, with only 20% coming from tax. [Interruption.]

There is a question coming, if hon. Members can be patient. Does the Chancellor intend to stick to his predecessor’s target of 80:20 or is he going to vary it?

Mr Hammond: My right hon. Friend will know that the surplus rule always came with the caveat that if the Office for Budget Responsibility forecast four rolling consecutive quarters of less than 1% annualised growth, the target would be suspended. The consensus among pretty much all forecasters is that is likely to be what they forecast this autumn statement, so my predecessor’s announcement was merely pre-empting something that almost everybody expects to happen. I am afraid to tell my right hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie) that how we are going to respond over the longer term to the resulting deficit will be set out at the autumn statement.

Mr Speaker: In the hope that the hon. Gentleman will provide a masterclass in the asking of a question, I call Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment. I accept that is not a question but a statement. May I go on to point out to him that Brexit provides a great opportunity? The £24 billion purchase of ARM by SoftBank is a sign of that. The trade deals that are being offered are a sign of that. Will he grasp this fantastic opportunity and lead us through to the “broad, sunlit uplands”?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend rightly points to the fundamental strengths of the UK economy. Britain is still one of the most attractive places in the world to do business, to start a business and to invest money, and it is right that we should focus on those positive aspects. But it is also right that we are conscious of the short-term turbulence that we will inevitably experience and of the need to manage that carefully over the next 18 months.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I, too, welcome the Chancellor to his place. As has been mentioned, SoftBank has made a huge investment in a fantastic Cambridgeshire business. It has done that because Cambridgeshire is at the forefront of technology and innovation. The company has said, as the Chancellor has mentioned, that it is going to double the workforce. Cambridgeshire can continue to attract investment such as this only if we have the infrastructure to support it, so will he confirm that he will be committed to infrastructure investment in roads such as the A10?

Mr Hammond: My hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right; raising the UK’s productivity is the long-term challenge of our economy, and infrastructure investment is one of the ways we do that. I draw attention to another point: the success of Cambridge today, not only as a centre of academic excellence but as an innovation hub of global importance, has arisen because of the very foresighted decision of Cambridge City Council many years ago to allow development around the city and the creation of the Cambridge business park, which is now a world magnet for investment.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I, too, congratulate the Chancellor on his ascension. One of the key flows of capital that is likely to increase post-Brexit is the £300 million or so that is invested every year in gifts by those seeking a UK investor visa. This is of little productive value to the UK economy. I wrote to the previous Treasury team suggesting that this money would be better invested in drug discovery but, amazingly, I got the brush-off. May I impose myself upon the Chancellor of the Exchequer and ask for a meeting to explain the merits of requiring these people to invest in the productive part of the UK economy?

Mr Hammond: I anticipate that there will be a need to fund UK Government gilt issuance for the foreseeable future, but I understand my hon. Friend’s point and I would be happy to discuss it with him.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I am sure you will allow me to extend my congratulations to the Chancellor. He will remember that I welcomed him as a very fresh-faced Back Bench to the 1997 Budget, when he already showed great promise, which he has more than fulfilled now. Does he agree that the major current threat—there are many—from Brexit is in fact the interruption to investment in British industry and in Britain, and therefore that the purchase by SoftBank of ARM is to be welcomed? In view of the undertakings that ARM has given, that is the best antidote to the prevailing doubts.

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right and I thank him for his kind words. We need to remind ourselves that we are running a 6.9% of GDP external account deficit, and that has to be funded somehow. It has been funded by an extraordinarily successful run of foreign direct investment into the UK—more than into
We now need to generate the confidence to allow it to resume.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I take this opportunity to welcome the Chancellor to his post, and also the Chief Secretary and other new Treasury Ministers. There is a real concern that the uncertainty surrounding Brexit is forcing many businesses and international banks to consider moving their core operations and the jobs that go with them overseas. Banks in particular make use of their EU banking passport arrangements to operate within the UK, so what measures will the Chancellor be taking to avoid the loss of those arrangements?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady is right to say that passporting is an important feature of the arrangements we have with the European Union. In the negotiations that we will have in the future with the European Union about Britain’s future relationship with it, protecting those rights for our very important financial services sector, which I should emphasise is not just about London—two thirds of financial services jobs in this country are outside London—will be a very important part of those negotiations.

Rebecca Long Bailey: Moving back to the issue of ARM, analysts this week have predicted a raft of foreign takeovers linked to the fall in the value of the pound following Brexit. The Chancellor stated this week that Britain is open to foreign investment, barely a week after the Prime Minister wanted to oppose such takeovers, so has the Government’s approach to securing new investment been reduced in the space of a week from an ambiguous industrial policy to merely slashing corporation tax and hoping for the best?

Mr Hammond: No. The UK remains very much open to foreign investment, but we are very clear that we want investors who will invest in British technology, British jobs and businesses headquartered, based and directed from the UK. We are not open to asset-stoppers.

Infrastructure Development

3. Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): What steps he is taking to support infrastructure development in the west midlands.

4. Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): What steps he is taking to support infrastructure development in the north-west.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): There are 40 schemes in the west midlands in the infrastructure pipeline, with a total value of £7.6 billion. More than 300 infrastructure schemes have been delivered in the west midlands since 2010. There are 88 projects in the north-west in the infrastructure pipeline, with a total value of £34.5 billion. More than 240 infrastructure schemes have been delivered in the north-west since 2010.

Amanda Milling: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his new role. The Rugeley B power station site is truly a hub of connectivity, where the national grid, broadband and rail infrastructure all come together, and it is an ideal location for redevelopment. Will my right hon. Friend outline the assistance that the Government can provide to ensure the speedy redevelopment of the site, and will he meet me to discuss the possibility of creating a Rugeley enterprise zone on this strategically important site in the west midlands?

Mr Gauke: I thank my hon. Friend for her kinds words, and for her question. It is not the first representation that I have received in the few days in which I have been doing this job, and I suspect that it might not be the last I receive today. I would be delighted to meet her to discuss the enterprise zone and the site that she talks about. It is important that we have world-class infrastructure. If we can bring that together in various forms on particular sites, it will enable us to make further and faster progress. I look forward to discussing that with her in future.

Andrew Stephenson: May I too congratulate my right hon. Friend on his promotion? The recently announced infrastructure bonds will help to improve productivity and promote economic growth across the north-west. Will he outline the projects that could be eligible for this funding?

Mr Gauke: I am not sure that this morning is the point at which I can provide specific examples, but I can say that this Government are very ambitious about infrastructure. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has pointed out, infrastructure is one of the ways in which we can drive up productivity. That is one of the great challenges that we face, but we as a Government are determined to address it.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): The Minister has reeled off a list of moneys going to infrastructure projects in the west midlands. Will he publish a list of all those moneys that he is delivering? Who is going to be accountable for this public money—the local enterprise partnerships, the combined authorities, the local authorities, or HS2 Ltd?

Mr Gauke: It was not just the money—I also rattled off the numbers. I would be delighted to provide the hon. Lady with details of the projects that have been delivered, with, as I say, 300 infrastructure schemes delivered in the west midlands and 240 infrastructure schemes delivered in the north-west. Accountability depends on the specific nature of the schemes. Clearly, over the past six years we have delivered on infrastructure, but there is more to do and we are determined to do it.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): One of the absurdities of the previous Chancellor’s tenure was the fiscal rule that forbade borrowing money for infrastructure investment even when the return on that investment would have grossly exceeded the cost of the borrowing. Instead, the former Chancellor ended up borrowing billions to compensate for low growth and the cost of failure. That orthodoxy was strongly challenged in the Conservative leadership election, so will we now see a more rational approach from this Chancellor’s team?

Mr Gauke: As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has made clear, and as, indeed, the previous Chancellor made clear, in circumstances where there is a projection...
of growth less than 1% over a 12-month period, that fiscal rule does not apply. The fact is that we inherited a very high deficit, and we have shown very strong determination over the past six years to bring that deficit down. As we face the challenges that we now face in terms of Brexit, had we not taken the tough decisions on public spending over the past six years, we would be in a much more vulnerable position than we are now.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The previous Chancellor announced a new light rail link between the midland metro and the new enterprise zone in Brierley Hill in my constituency. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss how we can extend that to the main line rail link at Stourbridge so that we can support businesses, communities and jobs in my constituency?

Mr Gauke: I note that my prediction that I would receive further representations and diary request appears to be holding true. I am happy also to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the project that he mentioned.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Chancellor to his position, and I welcome his whole team. It is a deserved promotion for the Chief Secretary, whom I believe I promoted only a month ago in a speech to the House.

EU funding for the regions comes to £10 billion a year. At the recent Local Government Association conference, councillors from all parties expressed their concern over the potential loss of these structural funds. Will the Chief Secretary clarify whether he plans to make funding provision equivalent to that received through the EU structural funds in the event of the UK leaving the EU?

Mr Gauke: First, I thank the shadow Chancellor for his kind words. Yes, his description of me as Chief Secretary last month proved to be ahead of its time. That is not a phrase I often use about the shadow Chancellor, but he was right on this occasion.

On the structural funds, of course we need to make an assessment of value for money and so on. We will make announcements in due course. I recognise the case for wanting to address uncertainty, but it is right that we follow due process before we make any announcements.

John McDonnell: I am grateful for that, but may I ask the Chief Secretary that, in the interests of local government stability, that statement is made sooner rather than later?

The vote to leave also affects the UK’s access to European Investment Bank funds, which last year came to £6.5 billion across the country. With business investment falling even before the vote to leave, and with Government investment scheduled to fall until the end of this Parliament, what action is the Chancellor taking to ensure that Britain retains its stake in the European Investment Bank?

Mr Gauke: First, on the general point, I recognise what the hon. Gentleman is driving at in terms of uncertainty and the desirability to resolve the issue sooner rather than later.

It is the case that the UK did very well from the European Investment Bank in recent months in terms of attracting investment. There is no evidence as yet that the UK will be discriminated against during the period that we remain members of the EU, but the hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue. We will continue to monitor the situation and we want to ensure that we continue to do well from the EIB.

Support for Businesses

5. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to support businesses.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The Government are committed to ensuring that Britain has a competitive corporate tax system that encourages innovation and business investment. We have already announced a reduction in corporation tax to 17%—the lowest rate in the G20—and we are reducing the business rates burden by £6.7 billion. The Government have also increased the rate of research and development tax credits and set the annual investment allowance at its highest ever permanent level.

Maria Caulfield: I thank the Chancellor for his response and congratulate him on his new role. Many small businesses in my constituency face difficulties. The Costcutter on Claremont Road in Seaford employs four people, but the store is too large to benefit from the Government’s extension of small business rates relief to properties whose rateable value is less than £12,000. Will the Chancellor therefore consider reintroducing the retail rate relief, which last year helped such businesses with a £1,500 discount on their rates bill?

Mr Hammond: The retail scheme was a temporary arrangement until the current proposals were fleshed out fully, so I am afraid that we will not be able to reintroduce it. Many businesses that benefited under the old, temporary retail scheme will benefit from the permanent scheme that we have introduced to reduce the burden of business rates, but I am afraid that some may slip through the net.

20. [905963] Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): May I congratulate the Chancellor and his team on their appointment? On supporting businesses, PricewaterhouseCoopers yesterday said that growth in Northern Ireland is likely to remain at zero, the worst in the United Kingdom. Will the Chancellor put in place some mechanisms—he has already discussed enterprise zones such as Belfast international airport—to help us?

Mr Hammond: One of our priorities, in the interests both of social fairness and of improving the productivity of the economy, will be to address the huge—one might say almost grotesque—disparities between economic performance in the different regions and nations of the UK. That will be a central part of our productivity agenda, which will be a key cornerstone of our long-term economic plan.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Since the referendum, some businesses in my constituency have put investment and recruitment on hold due to uncertainty. They welcome the policies that my right hon. Friend has mentioned. I also welcome the indication that he will look at further fiscal stimulus in the autumn statement, but that is some time off. May I press him to reveal a bit more about the options that he might consider to support the economy and businesses?
Mr Hammond: I am afraid that I shall not be tempted by my hon. Friend to speculate on the content, or even the date, of the autumn statement. What I can say is that the Bank of England is well equipped with the tools necessary to deal with the short-term needs of the economy following the shock of the referendum, and the autumn statement is well placed, after the batch of economic data that will be published this autumn, to provide a longer-term response.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new position. He may recall that his predecessor cut corporation tax for business to allow the living wage to be introduced. As we speak, Marks and Spencer is consulting on cutting overtime payments and Sunday and bank holiday pay, in order to do just that. What will the Chancellor do to ensure that my constituent, Mrs M, does not lose £2,000 a year because of the introduction of the living wage?

Mr Hammond: Very clearly, the intention of the introduction of the living wage was not to make people worse off; it was precisely to support the living standards of those on the lowest wages. I will look carefully at the case that the hon. Lady has drawn to my attention.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I welcome the Chancellor to his post. A report published in March illustrated that someone who lives in a deprived area is 50% less likely to start a business on a self-employed basis, and it highlighted the barriers they face to starting such a business. Will my right hon. Friend consider the recommendations in the report and work with me to reverse that trend?

Mr Hammond: I am very happy to do that. One of the great strengths of the UK economy is our innate entrepreneurialism. We need to foster that, and we need to make sure that it works in all areas, regions and nations of the United Kingdom.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): May I congratulate the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on their new roles? The problem we have seen over many years is that fiscal policy occasionally works against the interests of business. Innovation funding has been converted from grants to loans, and there has been a cut during this Parliament to the UK Trade & Investment budget. I ask the Chancellor, who is new and fresh to the job, to look again at those policies, in particular, to make sure that innovation and export support funding is aligned with innovating and exporting businesses.

Mr Hammond: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will be looking comprehensively at all areas of the portfolio as I prepare for the autumn statement, in the context of the economic situation that we face post this shock.

Stewart Hosie: I welcome that, and I ask the Chancellor to look again at one other thing. One of the problems that business and the economy face is a lack of demand. May I ask the Chancellor to look again not just at headline corporation tax cuts, but at an intelligent use of allowances—for example, the reintroduction of industrial buildings allowance—to build demand for construction now and long-term supply side capacity to boost what we do, particularly in terms of exporting, in the future?

Mr Hammond: I assure the hon. Gentleman that when we look at the corporate tax environment, we will not just be looking at headline rates. We will be looking at the marginal effective rates of corporate tax for investors in the UK, because that is what we want to target—more investment, more jobs and the creation of more wealth in the UK.

Business Rates

6. Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to reform the business rates system.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): As my hon. Friend knows, in Budget 2016 we announced the biggest ever cut in business rates in England, worth £6.7 billion over the next five years. The package cuts business rates for all ratepayers, and 600,000 of the smallest businesses will not have to pay business rates again. The Government are also looking to modernise the administration of the tax to make sure that it is fit for the 21st century.

Michelle Donelan: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her new role. Have the Government decided whether car park business rates will be devolved to local authorities? That would offer a significant reduction in council overheads, which could enable Wiltshire Council in my constituency to reduce parking fees and improve the economies of our local market towns.

Jane Ellison: I congratulate my hon. Friend on taking such a close interest in what will boost her local economy. The Government have announced that they will devolve 100% of business rate revenues to local government. The details are subject to consultation, and the consultation document was published by the Department for Communities and Local Government earlier this month. She and her local council may well want to contribute to that consultation, and she may want to make the point that she made so well just now.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Some of the richest areas in the country find it easiest to raise money through the business rate system. If we are not to perpetuate poverty and the gap between rich and poor parts of the country, do not the Government, if they are going to proceed with this, have to make sure that there are proper balancing mechanisms? Otherwise, the problems that we have seen in so many parts of the country, which feel completely forgotten and left aside, will be perpetuated for future generations.

Jane Ellison: I am very well aware of the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. In my previous role, I had responsibility for the public health grant, and those points were made in that context on several occasions. We have an open consultation on business rates retention. We are aware of that issue, and the existing system of redistribution will be continued in some form. Obviously, that is something at which we will look closely.
Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): The business rates system sometimes interacts with the planning system to leave premises empty, but incurring tax. Will the Government work to ensure that councils are appropriately incentivised to ensure that premises are productively occupied so that business owners have a chance of paying the tax they incur?

Jane Ellison: I hear the point that my hon. Friend makes. That is clearly something to which further consideration will be given.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Any help that small businesses get from business rates reform will be very welcome in my constituency of Huddersfield, but that does not outbalance the fact that my university and my manufacturing businesses have been hard hit by Brexit. I know that the Minister is not one of the guilty Brexiers, but what will the Government do to help manufacturing industry and universities so hard hit?

Jane Ellison: The Chancellor has already made a number of comments about how we will deal with and address this situation, and more will clearly be said in the autumn. It is important that we recognise that, while we undoubtedly face some risks and have to look to manage them, we must also seize the opportunities we can take from the situation we are in.

To return to the point about business rates, taking 600,000 of the very smallest businesses out of business rates altogether is a good thing. It has not taken effect yet. It is important to make it clear that although that has been announced, it has yet to take effect. We all have a job to do in the spring to make sure that our local businesses get the maximum benefit.

Northern Powerhouse

10. Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): What progress has he made on the establishment of the northern powerhouse.

Mr Speaker: Since 2010, my city of Leeds has seen hundreds of millions of pounds invested in its transport infrastructure. I wonder whether my right hon. Friend can confirm that the billions of pounds that were to be put into the northern powerhouse to invest in transport infrastructure across the whole of Yorkshire and the Humber will still be delivered.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

Mr Gauke: This is one of those rare occasions when the Chief Secretary can be like the man from Del Monte and say yes.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): The northern powerhouse plans in south Yorkshire are at risk. In the 1980s, our economic regeneration was kick-started by funding from Europe and it still supports small businesses, training and apprenticeships, so may I give the Chief Secretary another chance? Will he guarantee that the £174 million that has been pledged to south Yorkshire under the current programme will be paid in full?

Mr Gauke: The right hon. Gentleman will understand, as a former Treasury Minister, that there is a need for consistency. My answer remains that we will make an
announcement soon. We recognise the point that he is making and the desire to remove uncertainty, but I am not in a position to make an announcement this morning.

21. [905964] Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): There are nine enterprise zones in the north-west of England, including the magnificent Sci-Tech Daresbury in Weaver Vale, which employs more than 500 scientists. Does my right hon. Friend agree that enterprise zones are essential to the Government’s commitment to rebalance the economy, close the north-south divide and build a great northern powerhouse?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Enterprise zones, which were reintroduced by the Government in the last Parliament, are important in creating a clustering effect and a culture of enterprise. They are making a big contribution to the northern powerhouse and playing a role in the increase in investment in the north of England.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): May I welcome the new Ministers to the Front Bench? Five northern powerhouse combined authority leaders have requested a meeting with the Prime Minister in Manchester to discuss the serious implications of Brexit for the northern economy, given its massive contribution to the country as a whole. In advance of the Brexit vote, will the Chief Secretary tell the House how many civil servants were working on regional plans, or any other plans for that matter, for such an eventuality?

Mr Gauke: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman and welcome him to his post. I am delighted to see that the shadow Front Bench is almost up to full complement.

We obviously face a number of challenges in terms of the new situation, but there are also a number of opportunities. As I have made clear repeatedly today, the Government are determined to ensure that, whatever the consequences of the Brexit vote, we will enable the northern cities to prosper and work together. That remains a Government priority.

Early Intervention

11. Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): If he will commission research on the potential long-term savings to the public purse of greater investment in cross-departmental schemes to promote early intervention; and if he will make a statement. [905954]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): The Government recognise the benefits of early intervention to ensure that all children and young people receive the best possible start in life. The Government worked with the hon. Gentleman and others to establish the Early Intervention Foundation. We continue to provide funding to the foundation to develop and share the evidence base in this area. The Government have also invested £770 million in the troubled families programme, which aims to achieve sustained positive outcomes for 400,000 families with multiple complex problems by 2020.

Mr Allen: I welcome the new Treasury Front Benchers to their duties. I hope that they will take the opportunity over the summer to reorient the Treasury’s thinking away from late intervention, firefighting and paying excessively to put things right, and consider an early intervention philosophy that allows the Treasury to invest early and make a lot of money. They should look at Big Society Capital and its terms of reference, and consider the possibility of improving the market for social investment bonds. Will the Chief Secretary meet me and colleagues from all parties to discuss those issues?

Mr Gauke: I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss those issues. To be fair to the Government, we introduced social impact bonds and the troubled families programme, which seems to be working. There are good signs in terms of improved school attendance and reduced youth crime and antisocial behaviour. We do recognise the benefits of early intervention, but I am happy to discuss it with him at greater length over the weeks ahead.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I add my congratulations to the Chief Secretary and commend to him last year’s “Building Great Britons” report by the all-party parliamentary group for the first 1,001 critical days, which I chair. The report revealed that the cost of getting it wrong on perinatal mental health and child neglect is some £23 billion. Does he agree that investing in young people at an early stage is every bit as beneficial to the economy as investing in roads and infrastructure? Will he allow the all-party group to give him a presentation on how we can save him and the country a great deal of money and give our children a better future?

Mr Gauke: I would be interested in seeing such a presentation, whether with the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) or separately—I am happy either way. The Government have already demonstrated a willingness to look at any such case and will respond to the evidence, which I look forward to hearing.

Global Tax Evasion

13. Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): What steps his Department has taken to tackle global tax evasion. [905956]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): I am really proud of the role that the Government and the UK have played in recent years. The country has taken a leading role in tackling tax evasion and avoidance, driving fundamental reform of the international rules and standards. For example, we led the development and early implementation of the new global standard for automatic exchange of information on offshore accounts. I am sure we will continue to offer global leadership on this vital issue.

Tulip Siddiq: The Panama papers revealed what most of us had long suspected—that the super-rich enjoy manipulating the tax system—but I was astonished to learn in a written response from the former Chancellor that the £10 million multi-agency taskforce set up to investigate those revelations still does not have the
Panama papers in its possession. Will the Minister clarify what the £10 million has been spent on, or is it another example of creative Tory accounting?

Jane Ellison: I understand that there may be some logistical barriers to acquiring the papers—[Interruption]—with the journalists, in fact. I will write to the hon. Lady with more detail, but I do not believe there is any fault on the part of Her Majesty’s Treasury.

15. [905958] Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Does the Minister agree that one strand of activity in the campaign is to continue to reduce corporation tax? Does she agree that we should have an aspiration to have the lowest corporation tax of any country in Europe?

Jane Ellison: Obviously, the effective rate is what really matters. We have set out a sensible and good ambition for 2020, but internationally what matters is what people pay. I return to the point that the UK has led the world. More and more countries have signed up to looking at how we ensure that multinational corporations pay what they should.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): When it comes to corporation tax, we can only get the take that we should if we know what is going on in those companies. I welcome the Prime Minister’s words on tackling the Amazons, the Googles and others. May I suggest to the hon. Member for Stafford when it returns to the House in the autumn a public Bill when it returns to the House in the autumn a public consultation to discuss this matter?

Employment Levels

14. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What assessment he has made of recent trends in the level of employment.

[905957]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): The employment level stands at 31.6 million, which represents more people in work than ever before. Over the past year, employment growth has been driven by full-time workers and by high and medium-skill occupations, showing that the recovery has produced high-quality employment, helping to boost productivity and raise living standards across the country.

Jeremy Lefroy: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his well deserved appointment. In Stafford, employment is at record levels and the jobseeker’s allowance claimant rate has fallen since 2010 from 3.2% to 1.1%, but employers point out to me that there are increasing skills shortages. Will he have discussions with colleagues in the Department for Education about strengthening engagement between employers and schools on that subject?

Simon Kirby: My hon. Friend, as ever, makes an excellent point. Unemployment in his constituency has fallen by 2,700 since 2010. Skills are absolutely important and I will be having the conversation he suggests.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I welcome the new Economic Secretary to his role in the Treasury. I am sure he will bring a much-needed dash of colour and flamboyance.

Employment is incredibly important in my constituency and across Scotland. Will the Treasury give an absolute commitment today that not one penny of research and development funding that goes to the wonderful higher education institutions across Scotland, and particularly in my constituency, will be lost as a result of the EU Brexit decision?

Simon Kirby: The hon. Gentleman is, as always, very entertaining. The Chief Secretary has said that we will make an announcement in due course.

Topical Questions

T1. [905933] Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My priority is to ensure the stability and prosperity of the UK economy. That means a combination of near-term measures to respond to the shock that the economy has received, and longer-term measures to manage the impact of transition out of the EU and to reposition the UK economy to maximise its potential in the new circumstances we will then face.

Alberto Costa: I add my congratulations to the new Front-Bench team. Leicestershire County Council is one of the lowest funded local authorities in the country. The council is reaching the point where it may not be able to meet all its statutory obligations. Given that, will my right hon. Friend help to arrange an urgent meeting between his counterparts in the Department for Communities and Local Government and council officials to discuss this matter?

Mr Hammond: As my hon. Friend notes, that is a CLG lead, but I am very happy to facilitate such a meeting for him.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): The Chancellor will, I hope, have seen the research published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies this morning. It shows that young people in work are still earning 7% less than before the crisis, while older workers have seen no improvement in their earnings for seven years. Will the Chancellor take this opportunity to put an end to what is becoming a lost decade of austerity, deliver the public investment that can provide well-paid, secure jobs across the country and scrap the anachronistic fiscal rule?
Mr Hammond: Since this is our first outing together, let me take the opportunity to make it clear to the hon. Gentleman that I do not believe in the money tree; I am clear that we have to pay our way in the world. We have a very large fiscal deficit that we have to address, but while doing that we also have to ensure we maximise the productive capability of the UK economy. That means targeting our investment into skills—that does largely mean young people—and infrastructure, and encouraging capital formation in private businesses.

T2. [905934] Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Last year, the former Chancellor came to Hastings and committed to extending high-speed rail from Ashford to Hastings and Bexhill. This investment is the key to delivering local housing, a labour market and business expansion. I welcome the Chancellor to his position and ask for his commitment to this vital project.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. On the particular proposal he sets out, he is a strong champion for his constituents. If he will forgive me, in my new position of trying to control the purse strings all such matters have to be looked at. As I have made very clear, however, the Government are committed to improving transport infrastructure throughout the country, including in Sussex.

T4. [905936] Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I voice my compliments to the new Front-Bench team and my acknowledgement of the old. The prospect of moving to an ultra-low corporation tax rate has already been aired. That, of course, has huge implications for the revenues of developing countries. Will the Chancellor undertake to carry out and publish a spill-over analysis of the effect of UK tax rates and rules on developing countries, as the Governments of Ireland and Netherlands have done?

Mr Gauke: The position of the UK Government on corporation tax and the impact on developing countries is very clear. We believe in taxing the profits of economic activity that occur here, and that is as far as it goes. Over the last six years, we have consistently helped to build up tax capacity in developing countries and provided support to their revenue authorities so that they might be better able to collect the taxes that are due. The international system is moving towards helping those countries as well.

T3. [905935] Suella Fernandes ( Fareham) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor on his appointment and ask that when he looks through his in-tray, he pick up the recent report from the all-party group on financial education for young people. I chaired the inquiry that produced the report, which concluded that while it was a positive step that financial education was included in the national curriculum, delivery was still too patchy, meaning that millions of children were ill-equipped to deal with money when they left school. Will my right hon. Friend commit to making that issue a priority?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): I know that my hon. Friend takes a keen interest in this interesting and increasingly complex matter. It is very important that people have the skills they need to help them to navigate financial matters, which is why in 2014 the coalition Government made financial education part of the national curriculum in English schools. That said, I am quite happy to concede that there is more work to be done.

T6. [905938] Patricia Gibson ( North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Even excluding cuts to welfare and capital spending, the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts that funding for day-to-day public services will fall between 2009-10 and 2019-20 by the equivalent of about £1,800 per head, while between 2014-15 and 2019-20, day-to-day spending per head is forecast to fall by £1,000 per head. What plans does the Chancellor have to reverse this dangerous trend?

Mr Hammond: I have no plans at the moment to reverse the spending plans set out by my predecessor. Any such plans will be announced in the autumn statement. I would say to the hon. Lady, however, that Scotland now has devolved taxation and spending powers and can consider addressing the balance within its own competence.

T5. [905937] Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): The Chancellor got his first job in my constituency, so it is a pleasure to welcome him to his latest job. The borough of Rushcliffe has now produced two excellent Chancellors of the Exchequer. In truth, however, Britain has not had a Chancellor since Nigel Lawson who has taken tax simplification seriously. As we prepare the economy for Brexit, will my right hon. Friend make it one of his priorities and consider, in the eight months before the next Budget, creating a commission on tax simplification?

Mr Gauke: We have created the Office of Tax Simplification and are currently legislating in the Finance Bill to put it on a legislative basis. It is setting out more and more ambitious plans for how the tax system could be simplified, and a large number of its recommendations have already been implemented, but there is still more to be done.

T7. [905939] Tulip Siddiq ( Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): As a proud Londoner, I believe that we must have greater control over taxes and public services, especially in the light of Brexit. I know that my friend Sadiq Khan has ambitious plans for London. Will the Chancellor commit to an initial devolution deal for London in his first autumn statement?

Mr Hammond: I am afraid that I will have to disappoint the hon. Lady, as I cannot commit to anything in the autumn statement at this stage, but I am meeting the Mayor of London later this week and look forward to a constructive discussion with him.

Mrs Theresa Villiers ( Chipping Barnet) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor and his new team. Do they agree that we need a broad coalition of countries around the world if we are to ensure that big businesses start to pay their taxes? Will he give his full support to the work in the OECD, the G20 and the G7 that started at the G8 summit at Fermanagh in 2013?
Mr Hammond: Yes, as one of my colleagues has already said, if we are to tackle the issue of profit shifting by global corporations, we have to do it on a global basis. This is an important topic on the agenda of the G20 Finance Ministers meeting this weekend in Chengdu, China, in which I intend to take a full part.

T8. [905940] Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): What positive consideration will the new Treasury team give to the implementation of fiscal flexibilities to assist and underpin our tourism industry?

Mr Hammond: We will look in the autumn statement at all sectors of the economy, and where we believe that additional fiscal support is necessary, we will announce appropriate measures.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I welcome the Chancellor to his place. Does he agree that big business needs to change and that large multinational companies, including Amazon, Google and Starbucks, have a duty to put something back and pay off a debt to their fellow citizens, and a responsibility to pay their taxes?

Mr Hammond: Yes.

T9. [905941] Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): In a new report on living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK, the IFS finds that young people in their twenties are still earning 7% less than before the financial crisis, yet we know that the pressures on their incomes, particularly housing costs and student fees, are higher than ever before. What are the Government going to do to help this generation that is being left behind?

Mr Hammond: We have already had this question from the shadow Chancellor. Of course, we have introduced the national living wage, which will make a difference to people on low earnings at the bottom of the income scale. Interestingly, the hon. Lady perhaps hints at something else—questions of inter-generational fairness. The Prime Minister signalled early on in her tenure of office that that is one of the areas that she wishes to address.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and indeed the entire new Treasury team.

With some softening of the market in house sales, will my right hon. Friend commit to looking at the data and consider whether the 3% additional stamp duty on second property purchases is necessary, desirable or indeed raises any additional revenue at all?

Mr Hammond: I can certainly commit to looking at the data, and I can tell my hon. Friend that my approach to taxation is that it is there for a simple purpose: to raise revenue for the Exchequer. I expect the taxes we put in place to achieve that.

T10. [905942] Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): In the Queen’s Speech, the Government said that they will continue to support the northern powerhouse. Why, then, of the 15 infrastructure projects with the most public funding is only one in the north?

Mr Gauke: Some of the numbers quoted on regional impact do not take into account national projects such as HS2, which clearly benefit a number of regions. Let me be clear that, as I set out earlier, we have a very large commitment to infrastructure projects in the north of England, with something like 240 in the north-west and 300 in the midlands.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): As part of the west of England devolution deal, business rates will be devolved to a combined authority. Will my right hon. Friend commit to full implementation of the previous deal on business rates and recognise the importance of this deal to the regional economy?

Mr Hammond: We have no plans to announce any changes to the business rate plans that are already in place.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The Government have announced that they are going to give £375,000-worth of banking fines to the Jo Cox fund that was set up by her family and friends to support charities that mattered to her. That fund has already raised £1.5 million in just a month. May I welcome the Government’s decision to allocate banking fines to support that fund? Will the Chancellor join me in encouraging people to give to the fund, which supports the White Helmets, Hope Not Hate and the Royal Voluntary Service?

Mr Hammond: I am delighted to join the hon. Lady in making such an appeal. I am glad that the Government have been able to support this very valuable fund in memory of Jo Cox, and I am sure that members of the public, seeing the Government contribution, will now want to redouble their efforts to support it.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I add my welcome to the Chancellor and the new Treasury team.

There is a great need in the south-west to provide more high-skilled jobs to boost productivity. In order to do that, we need to attract the right businesses. In this post-EU world, could the Chancellor kindly give his commitment, much praised so far, to the A358 upgrade for those in Somerset?

Mr Gauke: I am rapidly learning that, when it comes to road programmes and other transport infrastructure projects, it is for me to respond. We remain enthusiastic about improving our transport network, whether it be in the south-west of England or elsewhere.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Given the Supreme Court’s ruling earlier this year, does the Chancellor have plans to review the Financial Conduct Authority’s failure to enforce the prospectus rules in the Lloyd’s enhanced capital notes case? One of my constituents has been fighting hard for pensioners, who have lost over £3.3 billion.

Mr Hammond: As indeed have constituents of mine, so I am familiar with this case from the point of view of a constituency MP. I have not yet had a chance to look at it from the point of view of a Treasury Minister, but I promise the hon. Lady that I will do so.
Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Given the fall in long-term borrowing costs, the ability of infrastructure investment to show that we mean business and the enthusiasm shown by the Front-Bench team, will Ministers meet me to discuss an acceleration of the dualling of the A303?

Mr Gauke: That will be me again.

My diary is filling up, and I was planning to take a summer holiday, but I may need to reconsider. I should be delighted to meet my hon. Friend.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Two infrastructure projects are critical to the north-east: increased airport capacity at Heathrow, and an expanded Metro system. What funding commitment can the Government make to those projects today?

Mr Gauke: As I think has been made clear, a statement on airport capacity in the south-east will be made in the autumn. As for the Metro, I cannot add much to what I have said before, but the Government obviously want to support transport infrastructure throughout the country, and are looking at all good projects.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues, but we have had 20 topical questions, and we must now move on.
Turkey

12.35 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on recent developments in Turkey.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Sir Alan Duncan): I thank the hon. Lady very much for applying for the urgent question.

As Members on both sides of the House will have seen from events unfolding on their television screens, it became clear on Friday evening that a military uprising was under way in Turkey. In plain terms, it was an attempted coup, which we condemn unreservedly. It was ultimately unsuccessful, and constitutional order has been restored, but 210 people have reportedly been killed, and some 1,400 injured. I am sure that the whole House will join me in expressing our sympathies and condolences to the people of Turkey on the tragic loss of life.

Her Majesty’s Government have, of course, been closely engaged throughout the weekend. Foreign and Commonwealth Office consular staff worked tirelessly throughout Saturday and Sunday to support British nationals who have been affected, and they continue to do so. We have thankfully received no reports of British casualties. Our advice to British nationals remains to monitor local media reports and to follow FCO travel advice, including the advice provided by our Facebook and Twitter accounts.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister spoke to President Erdogan last night. She expressed her condolences for the loss of life, and commended the bravery of the Turkish people. She underlined our support for Turkey’s Government and democratic institutions, stressing that there was no place for the military in politics, and also underlined the importance of our co-operation on counter-terrorism, migration, regional security and defence.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was regularly updated by officials as events unfolded. He visited the teams in the FCO’s crisis centre who responded to Nice on Friday morning, and visited those responding to Turkey on Saturday morning. He spoke to his Turkish counterpart, Mevlüt Cavusoglu, on Saturday to express our concern and our support for Turkey’s democratic and constitutional order quickly and in an calm, and to encourage all parties to work to restore the political parties in support of Turkey’s democracy, and stressing the importance of the prevailing of the rule of law and its rejection of the death penalty.

The Foreign Secretary attended the Foreign Affairs Council yesterday, and participated in a discussion about Turkey. There is a strong sense of common purpose between us and our European partners. The Foreign Affairs Council has issued conclusions strongly condemning the coup attempt, welcoming the common position of the political parties in support of Turkey’s democracy, and stressing the importance of the prevailing of the rule of law.

The Turkish Government now have an opportunity to build on the strong domestic support that they gathered in response to the coup attempt. A measured and careful response will sustain the unity of purpose which we have seen so far, and which was so evident on the streets of Istanbul and Ankara. The United Kingdom stands ready to help Turkey to implement the reforms to which it has committed itself, and to help the democratically elected Government to restore order in a way that reflects and supports the rule of law.

Emily Thornberry: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his answer, and may I take this opportunity to welcome him to his new position? It is unfortunate that he and his team have had to be brought to the House and did not think it right to make a statement themselves. I hope that the emergency landing at Luton of the right hon. Gentleman’s boss is not a bad omen, but we do wish the all-male ministerial team well at this crucial time.

Turkey is of pivotal cultural, political and strategic importance to the world, straddling as it does the east-west divide with borders to eight countries. It is a vital NATO ally and has important minorities, particularly Kurds and Armenians, as its citizens. Half a million people of Turkish or Kurdish descent live in the UK and they are desperately worried about their families. With 2 million British visitors a year, Turkey is greatly loved in this country, and the interests of our two countries cannot be separated.

How many British citizens have been arrested, if any, and what support is being provided to them? What is the current advice to British nationals within Turkey and to those who may be booked to travel over the next few days and weeks?

On Friday we saw the Turkish people, whether they supported the current Government or not, coming out to support democracy and making a clear statement that military coups have no place in modern Turkey. The question is whether President Erdogan will use this as an opportunity to deepen and strengthen democracy or to undermine it. The signs so far are deeply worrying, with 9,000 police officers and a third of the generals dismissed, 7,500 people arrested, including the most senior judges in the country, and the death penalty being introduced.

What reassurances has the right hon. Gentleman had that there will be fair trials for those accused of complicity in the attempted coup? Was the Foreign Office taken by surprise by this attempted coup? How big is the Turkish team in the Foreign Office? Does he have plans to expand it? What will happen to this vital ally—what will happen next to this partner, this friend? It is vital that we work together to ensure that Turkey has a secure foundation of democracy, freedom of speech and human rights into the future.

Sir Alan Duncan: I thank the hon. Lady for her warm welcome—to me at least—but I respectfully point out to her that the noble Baroness Anelay, who is also a Minister of State at the Foreign Office, was, when I last spoke to her, a woman. From a personal point of view, may I point out that I am also able to add to the spectrum of choice the hon. Lady would like to see in our ministerial team? [Interruption.] I might say to the...
hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) that he, of all people, should be aware of how exactly I add to that spectrum.

I am not aware of any UK citizens having been arrested, but obviously that is a very serious consular objective for us to pursue, find out and make sure that it remains the case. I think the whole House will agree with the hon. Lady's point about the importance of wanting the due process of law to be upheld, and for any trials, should they happen, to be fair, and to make sure that the highest principles of democratic standards are upheld, for which of course one needs a functioning and independent judiciary.

I will be discussing all these matters when I go to Ankara tomorrow, and I very much hope that in the reaction Turkey displays to this coup attempt it will be able to remain a very important member of NATO and a partner to other countries in Europe. The answer to the hon. Lady's straightforward question about whether we were taken by surprise is, yes; I am not sure there is anybody who was not.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The Prime Minister appears not to have mentioned the arrest of nearly 3,000 members of the judiciary in her conversation with the Turkish President. It seems a rather strange way to uphold the rule of law, and The Independent is reporting today that NATO's leadership has made it clear that a commitment to uphold democracy, including tolerating diversity, is one of the four core requirements for members of the alliance. Is that the position of Her Majesty's Government?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and indeed Secretary Kerry made similar such comments yesterday. As I have just said, retaining an independent judiciary, which will of course require judges working to apply the due process of law, is absolutely essential if we are to see the standards we wish to see upheld in Turkey. I note what my hon. Friend says about NATO. Turkey remains an important ally within NATO and a very valued UK partner, so we encourage Turkey to maintain its democratic institutions and the rule of law as a fundamental part of NATO's value agenda.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his place, and the spectacular late flowering of his ministerial career. We suspect that he may well be at the Dispatch Box on many occasions, substituting for the absent Foreign Secretary. We also remember the Foreign Secretary's film, "The Dream of Rome", in which he advocated Turkey's immediate succession to the European Union—an argument he later used to justify Brexit and the UK's removal from the European Union. Can we be assured that there will be no such ambiguity in the messages that now go to Turkey, and that while no responsible Government can support a military coup against a democratic Government, no responsible democratic Government engages in the suppression of civil liberties, the persecution of minority communities such as the Kurds, the imprisonment of thousands of people, the suspension of parliamentary rights, and the reintroduction of the death penalty? Will the Minister make it clear unambiguously to President Erdogan that it is not only membership of the European Union that is at risk from such actions, but also NATO membership?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his description of me—I had never quite seen myself as a hardy perennial in quite the same way. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who has been described as absent, is working furiously. Having been to Brussels already he is due to go to Washington, and he is meeting many European Foreign Ministers today in advance of meetings on Syria and Yemen. It is ill-judged of the right hon. Gentleman to criticise him for deputing me to answer this urgent question.

Alex Salmond: It's his job.

Sir Alan Duncan: Well I have a job too, which I hope I am doing to the satisfaction of the House as the Foreign Secretary's deputy. Turkey's accession to the EU is clearly a long way off, and it is far too soon after events to start making long-term judgments about it. Some might think that it is less of a matter for the UK than it was before 23 June.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend may know that 41 students from the Arthur Terry school in my constituency were caught up in the airport, together with seven members of staff. Thanks to the outstanding leadership of the headteacher, Neil Warner, and the senior member of staff on the team, Sue Bailey, who showed excellent and responsible leadership in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, all 48 were able to leave at 1 o'clock the following morning, and head to South Africa where their school is twinned with the Rondevlei school. Through my right hon. Friend, may I pay tribute to the outstanding service that the Foreign Office provided to my 48 constituents, and in particular to Matt Jordan, a Foreign Office official who was in the airport at the time and who rendered full Foreign Office and consular services to all my constituents in an outstanding way?

Sir Alan Duncan: My right hon. Friend is always fully on top of anything that affects his constituents in Solihull, and I know that on this matter he was closely in touch with them. I completely share his commendation of the initiative and leadership—

Mr Speaker: Or even in Sutton Coldfield.

Sir Alan Duncan: I beg your pardon. Yes—it is important that I get my geography right, and not just in the United Kingdom. What those teachers did was absolutely commendable, and the natural thing is for the Foreign Office to send people to an airport, which is a natural hub, in response to a sudden outbreak of concern. I am full of praise for the manner in which staff in our embassy reacted so promptly and with such initiative to the sudden and unexpected military uprising.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): Yesterday, I and my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) met the chairman of the British Alevi Federation. It raised deep concerns with us about the tension that has been rising in the largely Alevi and Kurdish populated neighbourhoods, due to attacks and demonstrations by apparently pro-Erdogan supporters. Many of my constituents have heard frightening reports from friends and family in Turkey who fear that they are being targeted. Will the Minister impress on President
Erdogan, and on whoever he meets tomorrow when he goes to Turkey, the need to ensure as far as possible the safety and protection of all citizens, especially ethnic and religious minority communities who feel vulnerable at the moment?

Sir Alan Duncan: I appreciate the concerns that the right hon. Lady has expressed. It is important that the leadership of Turkey includes all its citizens in the same climate of proper human rights and fair treatment within that country.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend to his position. He has formidable diplomatic and business experience, and he will add strength to a formidable Foreign Office team. President Erdogan used social media in the difficult hours immediately after the coup attempt was launched to rally the support of the Turkish people against the illegal attempt to seize power. In the past, however, the Erdogan Government have been restrictive in their approach to the use of social media by their people and critical of press freedom. Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to impress upon the Turkish Government that the continuation of the EU-Turkey migration deal, which goes to Turkey, the need to ensure as far as possible the safety and protection of all citizens, especially ethnic and religious minority communities who feel vulnerable at the moment?

Sir Alan Duncan: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments about my appointment. He is absolutely right to say that freedom of speech and freedom of the media are essential to the proper working of any democracy and indeed of any country. He is also right to say that the use of social media on this occasion proved very useful for quelling the uprising. I am sure that the irony of what he has said will not be lost on many people.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Some of us have always been sceptical about the suitability of Turkey as a safe country to which refugees could be returned under the EU deal. Can the Minister confirm that that EU deal is kept under review? Will he also impress upon the Turkish Government that the continuation of the deal, and the many advantages that stand to go to Turkish citizens under it, will be judged according to their response to human rights in particular?

Sir Alan Duncan: The UK is committed to the successful implementation of the EU-Turkey migration deal, which I think is what the right hon. Gentleman was referring to. We have seen no indication that the treatment of refugees in Turkey has been affected by the recent events. We will of course continue to monitor developments closely, but we want to see the deal continuing to work properly.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his return to the Front Bench in a role to which he brings considerable expertise and experience. Hon. and right hon. Members have rightly focused on the geopolitical and political implications, and the implications for UK nationals, of events in Turkey, but will he acknowledge that UK embassy staff in Ankara and the consular staff in Istanbul have played and continue to play a huge role in managing the implications of those events? Can he update the House on the situation and safety of our diplomatic and consular staff in Turkey?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. All our staff in Ankara and Istanbul will be grateful to him for raising this topic. One of the main reasons that I wish to visit Ankara tomorrow is to reassure the staff of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. They had a shocking and unpleasant experience when suddenly, out of the calm, jets were overhead, shooting, and they heard the sound of explosions very near to the embassy. Some of our staff were separated from their children. For this to happen so suddenly and in such circumstances is a traumatic experience, and I consider it important as a Minister to exercise a proper duty of care. It is therefore perhaps my top priority to do that when I go to Ankara tomorrow.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): There are still some questions about the origins of the attempted coup that took place last Friday evening. It is encouraging, however, that all the opposition parties in Turkey, however critical they might be of the Turkish President—they certainly are critical of him—made it clear that they were totally opposed to any military dictatorship and that military government was not the answer to Turkey’s problems. Would it not also be useful if the Government here made the Turkish authorities, and particularly the President, aware of the fears that the Turkish Government, led by the President, will use what occurred on Friday as a means of exercising further repression and arresting people who were in no way involved in the coup? It is difficult to understand why 2,700 judges have been arrested, for example. How could they have been involved, directly or indirectly, in what happened last Friday?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is not entirely clear exactly who was behind the coup attempt, but I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s concern about the breadth of the reaction and the rounding up of a lot of suspects. However, we do not want to speculate beyond that. I should like to make it clear to the House that the Prime Minister said yesterday:

“We call for the full observance of Turkey’s constitutional order and stress the importance of the rule of law prevailing in the wake of this failed coup. Everything must be done to avoid further violence, to protect lives and to restore calm.”—[Official Report, 18 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 559.]

I would add that we are watching closely to see that proper due process is applied in Turkey.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I represent a borough with a significant Turkish-speaking community, and on behalf of my constituents I should like to express solidarity with the Turkish people at this difficult time. What is the Government’s assessment of the alleged involvement of the Fethullah Gülen movement in the coup? What is the Minister’s understanding of the involvement of and links to that movement in this country?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is far too early to say, although we quite understand that Gülen’s name has been in the spotlight and that Turkey has applied to the United States for his extradition. That is of course a matter for Turkey and the United States. However, it is important,
as my hon. Friend has said, to understand that people living in the UK who have friends and family in Turkey will have concerns, and we need to issue reassurance to them that Her Majesty's Government are taking a proper interest in what has happened in Turkey and are fully engaged in trying to ensure that calm will prevail there.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Minister has rightly stressed the importance of Turkey as a significant NATO ally. Will he tell us what efforts are being made through the institutions and organisations of the NATO alliance to make it clear to the Turkish Government that democratic norms and adherence to the rule of law must be upheld?

Sir Alan Duncan: I imagine that pretty well every NATO country will have been in touch with Turkey. Of course we want the conduct of the Turkish Government to be fully compatible with membership of NATO, and NATO has its own standards and democratic requirements, to which we want to see Turkey fully adhere.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): As a member of the Council of Europe, I was in touch with Turkish MPs over the weekend. Turkey plays a vital role in the Council of Europe. What practical support will the UK Government give to Turkish MPs to help them through this crisis?

Sir Alan Duncan: Again, it is difficult to say at this early stage. However, I hope that our clear voice has been heard. One of the things that we have rightly said, and which the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) pointed out a moment ago, is that we welcome the fact that all the parties in Turkey have joined together to make it clear that they condemn the coup and that they wish to see democratic institutions prevail in Turkey. That echoes our own thoughts and beliefs, and I hope that our influence as diplomats and on the world stage can continue to encourage Turkey to step in that direction.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I warmly congratulate the Minister on his resurrection in all his glorious diversity. I am glad that he referred to consular staff in particular, because it was only in 2003 that the British consul general in Istanbul was murdered in a terrorist attack there. It has been our long-standing policy to bring Turkey into the European family of nations, whether within the European Union or more broadly through NATO, and to ensure that it faces west as much as, if not more than, it faces east towards Russia and Iran. With our leaving the European Union, how can we ensure that we enhance and strengthen that process and the rule of law, but we are talking about a repressive regime that has arrested thousands. Does he share my concern about the conditions that these men and women are kept in? When he goes to Turkey, will he ensure that their human rights are respected?

Mr Speaker: On the matter of diversity, the Minister of State and I share shortness.

Sir Alan Duncan: Perhaps that could also be translated as “brevity”, Mr Speaker.

I commend the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for the reputation that he enjoys as a former Foreign Office Minister and for the concern that he always showed for those who work in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, often in very difficult circumstances. In the future, we will have bilateral opportunities with Turkey and, notwithstanding our imminent departure from the EU, I think that any way in which Turkey can replicate the standards that we wish to see in other democratic countries across the European mainland is something that will help it to achieve exactly the objectives that the hon. Gentleman has just described.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): As my right hon. Friend said, we have an important relationship with Turkey, including our commitment to giving over £250 million in aid to support the 2.7 million refugees living there. Will the Government use that relationship to exert pressure on President Erdogan? He must not use the coup to legitimise a crackdown on all opponents of his regime, whether they were involved or not, and he must not further suppress freedom of speech.

Sir Alan Duncan: I share my hon. Friend’s concern. Turkey has taken an enormous number of refugees, for which we should commend and thank it, and the plight of Syria has been partly shouldered by Turkey. The Government and everyone in the House would urge that the reaction to this failed coup does not lead to unacceptable consequences.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. President Erdogan has repeatedly refused to rule out the return of the death penalty in response to this event. What discussions have the Minister or the Foreign Secretary had—or what discussions do they intend to have—with the Turkish Government to make it clear that such a change of heart would be regressive and wrong?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her comments. I absolutely agree with her on this rare occasion. Her Majesty’s Government strongly opposes the death penalty, which is the view of all like-minded Governments. It would be a deeply retrograde step, causing incalculable damage to Turkey’s standing at a time when it is important to embrace it within the world community and not see it become more isolated.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend and other colleagues to the Front Bench. We have heard today about democracy, due process and the rule of law, but we are talking about a repressive regime that has arrested thousands. Does he share my concern about the conditions that these men and women are being kept in? When he goes to Turkey, will he ensure that their human rights are respected?

Sir Alan Duncan: I assure my hon. Friend that when I am in Ankara tomorrow I will not be mealy-mouthed in saying what we think needs to happen. Human rights, not reintroducing the death penalty and the proper due process of law will of course form a large part of what we will urge upon the Turkish Government.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I am glad to hear the Minister talk about the importance of the rule of law and human rights. The last time I was in Turkey I went with the Inter-Parliamentary Union to get 10 imprisoned Members of Parliament out of jail, and I am glad to say that that was successful. Many of them were from the south-east of Turkey, and the situation in
Kurdistan—south-east Turkey—is dire with appalling conditions. The military should be reined back and human rights need to be emphasised. We have particular concerns about parliamentarians given the attack on the Turkish Parliament, and I am sure that the Minister will convey this House’s concern for them and our hope that Turkey will continue as a democracy.

Sir Alan Duncan: The right hon. Lady understands the region extremely well and has a long-standing reputation for defending human rights and understanding Kurdistan, which has an effect on Turkey. I will convey her thoughts. It is important to ensure that everything that we have been talking about on human rights is properly conveyed to the Turkish Government given that the region is complicated and has some acute and difficult pressures to handle.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his role. I have every confidence in his ability to answer questions in this House on the many occasions when the Foreign Secretary will quite rightly be promoting Britain’s interests abroad, which is his job.

I ask the Government to reiterate again that our commitment to democracy in Turkey is tied in with our commitment to women’s rights, gay rights and the rights of Turkey’s other political and religious minorities, who may well be feeling threatened at the moment.

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend is right to comment on the hard work of the Foreign Secretary. His list of important rights is something that we could apply to pretty much any country in the world, including Turkey.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on being one of the House’s great comeback kings. He will definitely be able to keep the Secretary of State on the straight and narrow.

Does the Minister recognise the concern in constituencies such as mine, which has the largest Turkish-speaking population in the country, that the manner in which the west behaves towards Erdogan is frankly similar to how we behaved towards Mubarak? Erdogan is stretching democracy beyond belief—putting Syrians into Kurdish areas to dilute the Kurdish influence in his country cannot be right. Will the Minister be clear about how Erdogan treats the Kurdish minority in his country?

Sir Alan Duncan: I understand what the right hon. Gentleman says. Given the Turkish population in his constituency, he is happy to offer him a face-to-face meeting to talk through the issues. We share the same value system and will have some difficult problems to resolve in the region with a collapsed Syria and terrorist pressure on Turkey, which is not free of such pressures and must work out how to handle them. We must appreciate that the issues are complicated, and I would welcome the right hon. Gentleman through the door of my office to discuss them in person.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his post—he will do a brilliant job—and welcome his statement in support of the democratically elected Government in Turkey. However, the international community has in the past supported military Governments in Pakistan under General Musharraf and in Egypt under General Sisi. Is it now the position of the UK Government always to support democratically elected Governments?

Sir Alan Duncan: We obviously support democracy and all the values and rights that go with any properly functioning democratic state. It is a reality of the world that many countries are not perfect, and I hope that we can use our diplomatic pressure to improve countries and make them understand what world pressure really is. You made a comment about shortness, Mr Speaker, and I hope that means that I am able to punch above my weight as Minister of State.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The Turkish Government have already instituted oppressive measures towards Kurdish people in eastern Anatolia, including the unwarranted arrests of lawyers, politicians, journalists and members of the public, leading to the death of many civilians—women and children—which goes largely unreported in this country’s press. Will the Minister impress upon the Turkish Government when he meets representatives tomorrow that the failed coup should not be used as a pretext for further repression of democratic people?

Sir Alan Duncan: I hope that I pretty much said that in my opening remarks. The failed uprising must not lead to perverse consequences along the lines that the hon. Gentleman describes. However, when it comes to terrorist acts, we need to understand that the Turkish Government have a legitimate right to defend themselves against those who would attack them.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s well-deserved return to the Front Bench. Does he understand that it is difficult to characterise the arrest of thousands of judges as a proportionate response to an act—however outrageous? Turkey’s membership of the Council of Europe must hang in the balance if it does not respect the independence of the judiciary.

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend points out the potential consequences of certain courses of action, on which it is too early to form a judgment. It is absolutely true, however, that judges are necessary for a functioning judiciary, so we look forward to seeing that there is a functioning, independent judiciary that can properly apply the rule of law.

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): I welcome the Minister to his place. EU Commissioner Johannes Hahn has expressed concern that the swift round-up of judges after the failed coup indicates that Erdogan had a pre-existing list of enemies, suggesting that much of Turkey’s response is predicated on score-settling. That mirrors the trends in recent years of suppression of free speech and civil liberties, of putting down political opponents and of fighting a brutal war against the Kurds. Will the Minister impress upon President Erdogan that the upholding of human rights and the rule of law is more important now than ever?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, I will. Three days after this attempted coup, it is inevitable that there will be lots of speculative judgments about what was planned, what
was pre-planned, whether there was a previous list and so on. It is impossible to know these things at this stage, which is one reason why I look forward to visiting, but the Government will speak out very strongly for human rights and for the equal and proper treatment of all citizens in Turkey.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his Front-Bench post. He brings formidable experience and intellect, and will serve the country well. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly annual session is due to take place in Istanbul this November. Does he agree that unless the security situation becomes untenable, that should go ahead in Istanbul, because despite the difficulties that may be ahead in where Turkey is heading, it will be far better to steer that if it stays in organisations such as NATO, rather than if it is exiled?

Sir Alan Duncan: I commend my hon. Friend for what he has just said, which is both wise and practical. One of the most important ways in which Turkey can be engaged and persuaded is through the forum of NATO. We wish Turkey to remain a full and compliant member of NATO, and I hope that that meeting continuing as he suggests would provide a powerful platform for bringing about the kind of positive developments we would wish to see.

Mr Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Turkey is democratic, but successive elections have shown that it is becoming increasingly authoritarian. How concerned is the Minister that President Erdogan will use this coup as a blank cheque to go against any or all of his opponents? The UK is leaving the European Union but we should still be concerned that Turkey gets its wish and eventually becomes a member. Will the Minister make it clear to President Erdogan on his visit tomorrow that if the death penalty is introduced, that will totally negate any ambitions Turkey has in that direction?

Sir Alan Duncan: I believe I am right in saying that if Turkey were to reintroduce the death penalty, it would be disqualifying itself from membership or future membership of the EU, so this would be a self-defeating act and against the objective the hon. Gentleman has put to the House.

Dr Andrew Morrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and his colleagues on their appointments. Turkey is a major NATO ally and partner, so how is it that we appear to have been completely blindsided by this military coup? What can be done with our partners to improve our situational awareness?

Sir Alan Duncan: In a troubled country with pressures of that sort, when their own Government are completely blindsided, it is probably not surprising that we were unaware that this was going to happen. I put it to my hon. Friend that there may have been nobody across the world, whatever the scope of intelligence, who had firmly predicted that this was going to happen on Friday night.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I know that the Minister will impress on President Erdogan how important it is that people get a fair trial, regardless of how serious the offence someone is accused of committing—indeed, the more serious the alleged offence, possibly the more important it is that they get a fair trial. It is difficult to see how that can happen when so many judges have been arrested. What practical help will the Minister be offering to the Turkish Government to make sure that anyone who has been arrested and is going to be put on trial gets a fair trial, in accordance with the proper rule of law?

Sir Alan Duncan: The most practical influence we can have on this is to join with like-minded countries and make our view clear collectively, be it through the EU or other forums that join together countries such as our allies in the United States. The collective and singular voice calling for upholding of the rule of law and the proper functioning of a democratic state is what we can most effectively provide at this early stage. The point about NATO has already been made. The point about the long-term objective of Turkey wanting to join the EU has already been made. I hope that bilateral discussions, the likes of which I hope to have tomorrow, will also impress on the Turkish Government exactly the point the hon. Gentleman has put to the House.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the Minister on his appointment. Will he say a little more about the fact that, as we know, human rights abuses against the Kurdish people have been increasing over time, and that the Kurdish people play such an important role in the fight against Daesh? Will he point that out in his conversations tomorrow? What more will he be saying about it?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Lady raises a very important point, because the UK and Turkey work in a close partnership to prevent extremist travellers from reaching Iraq and Syria, involving practical co-operation between our police and security forces. We want that to continue and we hope that it will, and we stand ready to help Turkey in any way we can during this difficult period.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): The Minister referred to constitutional order being restored, but we know that in President Erdogan’s hands that is a dark and elastic concept, as the experience of religious, ethnic and regional communities, of journalists, of parliamentarians and of rights activists shows. If the Government are going to communicate strongly to the Turkish Government that this coup should not be used as an excuse for a carnival of repression, will he reinforce that by direct engagement with the democratic opposition in Turkey and with legitimate rights activists there, too?

Sir Alan Duncan: The UK’s policy is to engage across all parties within Turkey. The hon. Gentleman should be aware of the EU Foreign Affairs Council statement yesterday, which condemned the coup and welcomed “the common position” of all “the political parties in support of Turkey’s democracy.”

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): One aforementioned irony of this situation is that the Foreign Secretary published a scurrilous poem about President Erdogan.
That is one of the glories of our democracy, but is the serious point not that, currently, if someone published a similar poem in Turkey they might be subject to arrest? What are the Government going to do to ensure that free speech is preserved, even in the current situation?

Sir Alan Duncan: Exactly as I have been explaining for nearly an hour now, we have to apply the maximum and optimum diplomatic pressure we can, both bilaterally and multilaterally, and we will continue to do that. This is often about relationships and persuasion; I once teased the Foreign Secretary, but I am happy to say that we are getting on extremely well.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I warmly congratulate the Minister on his new and elevated role. What discussions has he had with colleagues in the Department for International Development to ensure the safety of and provisions agreed for refugees, including humanitarian aid arrangements?

Sir Alan Duncan: We speak regularly to people in DFID, and I used to be a DFID Minister. I have not had any direct conversations, as I have been in this job for only 48 hours, but prompted by the wisdom of the hon. Lady, I assure her that I shall do this at the earliest opportunity.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, congratulate the Minister on his appointment and thank him for his statement. There was much concern about human rights abuses in Turkey before the attempted coup. During the recent coup there have been documented attacks on Christian churches in Trabzon and Malatya. Will he draw to the attention of the Turkish Minister tomorrow the persecution of Christians and ethnic minorities, and the attacks on their property and on them in Turkey?

Sir Alan Duncan: We strongly encourage Turkey to continue to work towards the full protection of fundamental rights, especially in the areas of minority rights, freedom of religion and freedom of expression. We will continue to do that, and I fully take on board the hon. Gentleman’s point about the need to protect Christians in Turkey.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I, too, add my warm congratulations to the Minister on his appointment and express my hope that he will bring an enlightened perspective to some aspects of our foreign policy. At 4.30 today I was due to meet Garo Paylan, a Member of the Turkish Parliament for Istanbul and a leading member of the HDP, the principal social democratic opposition party. Obviously, he has been unable to make that meeting, but he has relayed to me his extreme concern that many members of that party are now being rounded up and detained by the Turkish authorities, despite having nothing whatsoever to do with this attempted coup. May I therefore ask the Minister to make it specifically clear to President Erdogan and the Turkish authorities that this country will not tolerate the repression of democratic opposition parties in that country, whose only misdemeanour is to fulfil their constitutional duty to criticise the Government?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Gentleman speaks passionately and forcefully on this matter, and I fully understand what he is saying. This is why our ambassador and all of our embassy team are closely watching exactly what is happening to democratic parties, and we are engaging with them across the spectrum of political involvement to make sure that we know exactly what is going on and can make our voice heard accordingly.
Points of Order

1.20 pm

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During the urgent question, it was implied, at least from the Tory Benches, that the Foreign Secretary was abroad, representing this country’s interests—[Interruption.] Yes, it was. Is it possible that we could fit a locational device to the Foreign Secretary—a Boris beacon—which would tell us when he is and when he is not available to join us here in the Chamber?

Mr Speaker: I am bound to say two things to the right hon. Gentleman. First, I am no great enthusiast for over-zealous surveillance. Secondly, within whosesoever competence the matter might fall, it is not a prerogative of the Chair, but I have a sense, and I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will not take exception to my saying this, that on this occasion his inquiry was substantially rhetorical, and he was more interested in what he had to say to me than in anything that I might have to say to him.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Could you advise me how I may be able to put it on record that the House has just been brilliantly served by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, answering all the questions that the House put?

Mr Speaker: Well! The hon. Gentleman is in some danger of rising in the House’s league table of colleagues who specialise in complimentatory remarks, but there is a fine line between being complimentary and being Uriah Heepish or oleaginous. May I gently suggest that the hon. Gentleman have a word with his right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) about the dangers of over-indulgence in that regard? We will leave it there for today.

I thank all colleagues for taking part. Very sincerely, may I thank the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), for attending so courteously and with such good humour to the inquiries from colleagues across the House on that very important matter?

Income Tax (Non-Military Expenditure)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.23 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require HM Commissioners of Revenue and Customs to record income tax revenues where the payee self-certifies as holding a conscientious objection to public spending on defence purposes and report to Parliament thereon; to place a duty on HM Treasury to take account of the amount and proportion of such self-certified income tax income in preparing the supply estimates; and for connected purposes.

The central purpose of the Bill is to give taxpayers who have a conscientious objection to war the right to direct to a non-military security fund the portion of their taxes that would otherwise be spent on military purposes. One hundred years ago, at the height of world war one, Britain became the first country in the world to make the legal right of conscientious objection available to all British subjects.

The Military Service Act 1916 simultaneously claimed the right to force men to die for their country, while also granting the legal right of conscientious objection in Britain for the first time. Thousands of men, including both my grandfathers, registered for exemption from military service on the grounds of conscience. Some COs, like my grandfathers, took up alternative service, such as driving ambulances and running field hospitals. Others felt that they could take no part in any activity connected to the war and they were imprisoned, but what linked them all was their absolute determination to be true to their beliefs, despite marginalisation.

Since 1916, the right to conscientious objection has been recognised in every significant international treaty. The European convention on human rights, the United Nations universal declaration of human rights and the British Human Rights Act all testify that everyone has the right to “freedom of thought, conscience and religion”.

The past 100 years has seen immense progress in the democratisation of war. Modern wars are no longer fought with conscript armies; armed conflict relies now on professional armies and high-tech weapons. Security is supposedly maintained with the ideology of deterrence. In short, war is waged with money, rather than manpower—funded by UK taxpayers—and yesterday this Parliament voted to support the nuclear deterrent, at a cost of £30 billion.

The law, as it stands, prevents many from acting in accordance with their own conscience, as their tax money is being spent on armed conflict, which they object to on moral, religious or ethical grounds. Some equate paying for killing with doing it themselves. These few thousand people are faced with two options—either keeping their income below the taxable level, as a lady whom I met outside earlier today has done all her working life, or withholding a portion of their tax and facing prosecution and bankruptcy. There is no other alternative, and no right to object.

I thank the campaigning organisation Conscience: Taxes for Peace not War for helping me to prepare this Bill. It has been compiling a list of these modern-day
conscientious objectors, who have been writing statements of conscience, as world war one COs did before them. One of these COs, Diana Warner, said:

“We have seen increasingly brutal and far-reaching wars, massive death and displacement of civilians, untold trauma and injury to our soldiers, and environmental destruction. As a GP I work every day for the health and wellbeing of my patients, and as a taxpayer I must do the same for the security of people in the UK and elsewhere. I insist on the right as a Conscientious Objector for my taxes to be used to forge peace and not to be used on the mechanisms of war.”

If conscientious objection can be recognised in wartime, why not in peacetime, too?

Today, the rights of COs to military tax are being campaigned for across Europe, the USA and Canada. In passing this Bill, Britain would lead once again, setting a world precedent and demonstrating that we are a leader in human rights and individual freedoms. Those who object to funding war and preparation for war still want to contribute to the security of our country and the wellbeing of our world, so this Bill calls for a mechanism for COs to fund non-military peace-building and conflict prevention initiatives, which would contribute to national security while allowing individuals to pay their taxes with a clear conscience.

By permitting the right to invest in peace rather than war, we are not only granting an individual freedom, but making a substantial step in the direction of a more effective and humane foreign policy. There are two possible destinations for this hypothecated tax. The first is the Department for International Development, which is highly regarded internationally for the promotion of social justice. This Government’s commitment to supporting DFID is commendable. The second possible destination is the less well-known conflict, security and stability fund, a cross-departmental fund of just over £1 billion. It was created by this Government to address the causes of international conflict.

If Britain were to pass this Bill, the UK would make the hard-won right of conscientious objection relevant to today’s society by granting people the right not to pay for someone to kill on their behalf. We could also take a lead in helping to redefine the common understanding of security. Genuine, long-term security is achieved not with ever more sophisticated weapons and increased spending on “defence”, but by co-operation, negotiation, and shared understanding of the problems that face humanity—poverty, ill health, and environmental degradation.

I now wish to move on to address some common objections to a Bill of this type. First, the Bill is not seeking exemption from paying taxes but allows COs to pay their fair contribution towards national defence with a clear conscience by investing in non-violent alternatives to war and weaponry. COs would rather invest their fair share in longer-lasting and more sustainable means of conflict resolution and prevention.

Secondly, on the criticism that the Bill introduces hypothecation, is not the Government’s sugar tax, to be spent on sports provision for young people, a form of hypothecation; and what about the additional tax on insurance premiums that is going to be allocated to flood prevention? The UK’s most significant form of personal hypothecation would appear to be Gift Aid, which redirects personal income tax towards a named charity. This sum amounted to £1.19 billion in 2014-15. Gift Aid is already widely used by taxpayers to direct funding to charitable causes.

Some say that the Bill would create a precedent for other pressure groups to petition this House to divert taxes to their favourite causes or away from their personal dislikes—but military tax is specifically an issue of conscience, not a political preference. This principle was recognised 100 years ago by Her Majesty’s Government, and I am laying a case for an extension of that right.

Finally, there is the issue of practicality. The administration of the provision set out in this Bill would merely need a signed declaration to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and a transfer of an already-calculated sum of money to one, named, Government-controlled fund. The calculations are already provided by HMRC to UK income tax payers as a matter of course. The destination of the transferred tax receipt would be a single fund from which moneys would be drawn for the purposes indicated in the Bill.

This Bill seeks to acknowledge the existence of conscience when spending money, in order to stop forcing people to pay for wars that they do not morally agree with and for weapons they cannot, in all conscience or reason, endorse. Let us acknowledge the rights of individuals committed to this by extending the recognition of conscience with regard to war. You get the world you pay for—let us allow the right to pay taxes for peace, not war.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Ruth Cadbury, Mr Virendra Sharma, Mr Roger Godsiff, Alan Brown, Caroline Lucas, Michelle Thomson, Hywel Williams, Martyn Day and Kate Green present the Bill.

Ruth Cadbury accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 December and to be printed (Bill 54).
Higher Education and Research Bill
Second Reading

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I inform the House that the amendment has not been selected.

1.34 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): I beg to move. That the Bill be now read a Second time.

As the Prime Minister said outside Downing Street last week, this Government want to give everybody, no matter what their background, the opportunity to go as far as their talents will take them, in a country that works for everyone. Our higher education institutions are crucial to giving people the power to determine their own futures. They present opportunities for individuals to better themselves—to broaden their knowledge base, sharpen their skills, and participate in the groundbreaking research that can make the future brighter for everyone.

My time at Southampton University was one of the most shaping periods of my life. I should point to my time at the Department for International Development as another of those periods. For me, the chance to go to university was absolutely pivotal to being able to make something of myself. Today, I can still point to the telephone box in Kingsbridge, Devon where I rang through to get my A-level results while we were on holiday that year. In that moment, my whole future changed for the better. I was the first person in my family to be able to go to university. I remember, after that call, going to the pub across the road to celebrate with a drink. None of us really knew what going to university would be like for me, but we all knew that it was going to be the best thing and that it would improve my life chances. Opportunity is about giving our young people the freedom to fly, and universities are absolutely central to that.

My party’s record on this in government is one we can be proud of. We have taken away the limit on student numbers so that more people than ever before can benefit from higher education, and the participation rate among students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds is at record levels. We have put in place the essential funding changes that have placed our universities on a stable financial footing so that they are resourced for success, and we have protected investment in our world-class science base.

The universities that our young people attend are some of the best in the world. We punch well above our weight, with 34 institutions ranked in the world’s top 200 and more than twice that number in the top 800. But there is more to do to make sure that everyone can access a high-quality university place, and in spite of the progress made, we are far from meeting our economy’s need for graduates, so this Government are absolutely determined to support and nurture our universities, and to ensure that they are open to every student who has the potential to benefit from them.

The creation of new universities is an undoubted force for good, both academically and economically. Recent research by the London School of Economics shows that doubling the number of universities per capita could mean a 4% rise in future GDP per capita too. However, the current system for creating universities can feel highly restrictive, with new providers requiring the backing of an incumbent institution to become eligible to award its own degrees. This Bill levels the playing field by laying the foundations for a new system where it will be simpler and quicker to establish high-quality new providers. I am pleased that in May the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) confirmed that the Opposition do not object to broadening choice for students by expanding the higher education sector.

These reforms, which are the first since the 1990s, enable us to maintain the world-class reputation of our higher education institutions, because quality will be built in at every stage—from the way we regulate new entrants to how we deal with poor-quality providers already in the system. I recognise that there have been concerns about the quality of new providers—that they cannot possibly be as good as what we already have. It is not the first time that such arguments have been made. The same arguments were made when the new red-brick universities were being established just before the first world war, but today Sheffield, Birmingham and Manchester—which I visited very recently in my previous role—are world-class universities. This “quality” argument was made about the 1960s expansion, but in four of the past 10 years the Sunday Times award for university of the year has gone to one founded in that very period—currently the University of Surrey. In 1992, it was a Conservative Government who had the vision to set free the polytechnics to enable them to become universities.

Now we are making it possible for a whole new generation of universities to help us to extend access to higher education for young people across our country.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State to her new position and look forward to working with her over, I hope, the next few years. Does she agree that one aspect of the post-war universities and the post-1992 polytechnics was that students were not asked to contribute fees in order to receive a university education?

Justine Greening: I acknowledge that the Scottish National party takes a very different view of this issue. The reality is that the choice that it has made has resulted in fewer students being able to go to university in Scotland. One in five students in Scotland who apply for, and who have the grades to get, a place cannot go because the funding is not available. The hon. Lady’s Government in Scotland have made that choice, but it is not a choice that this Government want to make. We have to make sure that places are available for students who have the potential and talent to make their way in life. Putting a cap on opportunity and potential is not just bad for students; it is bad for our country more broadly.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): First, may I congratulate my right hon. Friend on assuming her new role? She has been an outstanding advocate for greater social mobility in every role she has had in frontline politics, and I am delighted to see her in this job.

Is it not the case that, following the introduction of fees, we have seen more students from working class and poorer backgrounds go to university in England and Wales, while in Scotland educational inequality has worsened, to the extent that the First Minister of Scotland...
[Michael Gove]

had to sack her Education Secretary in despair at the way in which inequality was growing north of the border?

Justine Greening: Since 2009, students from a disadvantaged background in England are 36% more likely to go to university. It is not good enough to come up with excuses and tell young people of great quality who have the grades that they cannot go to university because the Government who, unfortunately, are running the country in which they live are not prepared to take the decisions to enable funding to get to the sector and create the places that they need. We are prepared to do that.

The Bill is about opening up the sector to enable new providers to enter it and create the extra places that our young people need. There will be rigorous tests for those new providers, as well as for those that already exist, centring on quality and making sure that they have financial stability. We are interested in enhancing the world-class reputation of our universities in creating opportunity for all, rather than in expansion for its own sake.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way and offer her huge congratulations on her new role. Does she agree that the new university side of the Bill will lead us into a new era of focusing much more on gearing up our students for the workplace and on linking with business to provide the exact courses required to upskill our people for the future?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The good news is that we expect many—indeed, most—of the jobs created over the next few years to be graduate-level jobs. Our economy is creating opportunities, but we need to make sure that our young people are in a position to take them. That is part of the reason why this Bill is absolutely critical. Wherever and whatever a person is studying, part of how they are able to succeed is making sure that they get high-quality teaching. That is why we are delivering on the Government’s manifesto pledge to implement a new teaching excellence framework for universities.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): May I also congratulate the right hon. Lady on her new job? I was also the first in my family to go to university. Ashfield, which I represent, has among the lowest number of 18-year-olds in the whole country going to university. The Secretary of State says that she wants to see opportunities for people from ordinary backgrounds, but how is scrapping grants for the poorest kids going to help?

Justine Greening: The bottom line is that the evidence base shows not only that more young people are going to university than ever before, but that a higher proportion of them are from disadvantaged backgrounds. As I said to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), we do our young people a disservice if our system cannot be financed to create places for them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Justine Greening: I am going to make some progress, because it is important that I cover the teaching excellence framework, which is at the heart of the Bill.

The framework will assess and drive up quality by providing reputational and financial incentives for success, which is a proven approach to ensuring high standards at our universities. That approach is based on what we have learned from our experience. It was a Conservative Government who introduced funding for research on the basis of quality, which is now a widely accepted way of working. The research excellence framework is regarded globally as the gold standard for institutional research. By extending that principle to teaching, we can ensure that British higher education remains in the world’s elite, and that students at all universities—old and new—receive the quality teaching that they have every right to expect.

Let me be absolutely clear: the Bill does not raise tuition fees or change current procedures for secondary legislation setting the maximum tuition fee cap. That will, rightly, continue to require the same level of parliamentary scrutiny as before, and the Bill will allow the maximum fee cap to keep pace with inflation, which the last Labour Government allowed for every year from 2007. What we are saying to high-quality providers is, “You can access fees up to an inflation-linked maximum fee cap if—and only if—you can demonstrate that you are providing high-quality teaching and you have an agreed access and participation plan in place.”

The Bill allows fee caps to be set below the maximum, to reflect varying levels of teaching excellence framework awards. The providers that are not meeting those standards will have to charge fees beneath the maximum fee cap, and that cap will not increase in real terms.

Our proposal to maintain the real value of the maximum fee cap, but only for those with excellent teaching, is backed by those who know the sector best. Universities UK has described that approach as “balanced and sustainable” and argues that maintaining the real value of the maximum fee cap is “essential to allow universities to continue to deliver a high-quality teaching and learning experience for students.”

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on her appointment. I am sure that she is as shocked as I am that vice-chancellors are welcoming the opportunity to put university tuition fees. Does she agree that many students and graduates who have gone through that £9,000 system do not feel that that level of tuition fee has been justified and that they have not seen the benefits of the decision that this House took some years ago?

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. The real-terms ability of the maximum fee to keep up with inflation is enabling £12 billion of investment to get into higher education over the coming years. It is critical to make sure that students get value from the investment that they make in themselves and that teaching is of high quality. That is why the teaching excellence framework is such an important part of the Bill.

The proposed office for students is another part of the Bill that clearly shows that we are putting students at the heart of our higher education policy, as they should be. The creation of an office for students, which
will be the principal regulator for higher education, will put students' interests at the heart of regulation. It will have a legal duty requiring it to consider choice and the interests of students, employers and taxpayers, and it will look across higher education as a whole, with responsibility for monitoring financial stability, efficiency and the overall health of the sector.

The current system was designed for an era of direct Government funding of higher education when fewer people attended university. Higher education attendance is no longer a privilege of the elite. We lifted the limit on student numbers, meaning that more people than ever before have been able to benefit from a university education. The legislative framework needs to reflect that.

The office for students will create a new single register of higher education providers, replacing the current fragmented system and ensuring a single route into the sector. The simpler system means that this Bill will reduce regulatory costs on the sector and contribute to this Government's deregulatory agenda. It also ensures that the requirements are clear and fair. Only those on the single register will be able to obtain degree-awarding powers, become universities or charge fees that attract student loans. Those providers will have to comply with conditions relating to, for example, their financial stability and the quality of their provision. The office for students will have powers to impose additional conditions—for instance, around access and participation for students from disadvantaged backgrounds—on fee-capped providers that wish their students to be able to access student support.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Let me join in the congratulations to the Secretary of State on her appointment. Why is there no duty on the new office for students to promote collaboration? The crisis that we confront in this country is around technical education, not higher education. If we want to grow the number of students on level 5 apprenticeships, we need to transform the level of integration and collaboration that exists between further education and higher education. Why is that dual-track system not being encouraged by placing a duty to collaborate at the heart of the office for students?

Justine Greening: I take the right hon. Gentleman's point, which is an important one. I want universities to continue to work hard on the ground in many of the local communities of which they are part, to encourage a pipeline through which children can come and apply. If the percentage of university students from disadvantaged backgrounds is to rise, that is incredibly important.

The right hon. Gentleman will be interested to know that an element of the Bill tackles collaboration, specifically with UK Research and Innovation, which I will come on to shortly. There will also be time to debate this in the Bill Committee. I absolutely agree with the sentiment that he has expressed, and it is important that universities engage with local communities beyond their own campuses and encourage young people.

Andrew Gwyne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to her new post. Before she moves off the subject of collaboration, I am disappointed that there is no mention in the Bill of collaboration with the new combined authorities, especially those, such as the one in Greater Manchester, that are to take on some of the skills agenda. What role does she think local government and local enterprise partnerships have in making sure that higher education is part and parcel of that partnership for a better local economy?

Justine Greening: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that those different parties have to work together at a local level. The University of Roehampton, in my constituency, does really great work in reaching out to our local community. As a higher education institution, it has a large proportion of students from more disadvantaged backgrounds studying for degrees. He is right about that. I am determined to make sure that the higher education sector plays its role in communities more broadly. I do not believe that collaboration necessarily has to be codified in the Bill, as he suggested, for it to happen, but I agree with the sentiments that he expressed.

Several hon. Members rose—

Justine Greening: I want to make a little more progress, because it is important that I continue to inform the House of how the office for students will work, and particularly how it will regulate providers.

If a provider breaches its conditions of registration, the OFS will have access to a range of sanctions, including monetary penalties and, in extreme cases, suspending or deregistering providers, to safeguard the interests of students and taxpayers and to maintain the world-class reputation of the sector. Our proposals have the support of those who know best, with the likes of Professor Simon Gaskell, chair of a taskforce that was established to review the regulation of the sector, commenting that

“there have been a number of significant changes to the funding of higher education and to the number of providers offering courses. Regulation of the sector needs to keep pace with these developments if confidence, and our international reputation, are to be maintained.”

Indeed, only today the University Alliance described the Bill as

“a raft that can take us to calmer waters”.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): The Secretary of State has emphasised the need for collaboration. Clause 2(1)(b) mentions

“the need to encourage competition between English higher education providers...in the interests of students and employers”. She has identified that collaboration is in the interests of students and employers, so why is she objecting to putting it in the Bill?

Justine Greening: I feel as though we are already delving into the Bill Committee debate that will no doubt take place on this clause. I welcome the House's engagement with the Bill. It is important to get it right, and we will have an important debate to make sure that it is properly structured. I look forward to the Bill Committee debate when Parliament returns after the recess.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Justine Greening: I will take one more intervention before I make some progress.
Roger Mullin: I welcome the Secretary of State to her new post, and I look forward to her future briefings on the Scottish education system being more accurate. May I provide some insight into one aspect of collaboration, which could usefully be strengthened? Twenty-five per cent. of all students who enter higher education in Scotland do so through the college sector, and many colleges are in collaborative arrangements with universities. We have 2+2 arrangements, as we call them—two years in college, and two years in university—and so on. That is something that the English system could well have a look at.

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman makes a further point about the need for universities to be part of their broader communities. It is probably worth my setting out how much I welcome the fact that the further and higher education briefs are now part of a broader Department for Education brief, which makes us well placed to look across the piece at how the institutions that help to develop our young people’s talent and potential can work effectively together, as well as with broader communities.

Thanks to the reforms we introduced in the last Parliament, the entry rate for young students from disadvantaged backgrounds is at a record level. In the final year of the last Labour Government it was around 14%, and today it stands at almost 19%. But we need to go further. As the Prime Minister said last week, this Government “will do everything we can to help anybody, whatever your background, to go as far as your talents will take you.”

This legislation supports the key principle that higher education should be open to all who have the potential to benefit from it, but this has to be about more than just accessing opportunity. Although application rates for students from disadvantaged backgrounds are at record levels, we want to ensure that those students are supported across their whole time at university. Too many disadvantaged students do not complete their courses, for various reasons, and universities can and must do more to help them to get across the finishing line. That will allow them not only to gain the degree that they set out to get, but to reap the career rewards of doing so.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I, too, congratulates the Secretary of State on her new position. What does she think is an acceptable level of debt for a graduate?

Justine Greening: We need to look at the level of tuition fees that has been introduced, the rate of applications from disadvantaged students, and the number of disadvantaged students who are going to university. Those young people are taking a decision to invest in themselves, and they believe that it will offer value for money. The Bill will enable us to strengthen that decision by underwriting the teaching in universities with a teaching excellence framework.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her position, and I look forward to working with her. We have had much discussion of disadvantaged young people, but how will she encourage participation among mature disadvantaged groups, particularly women? There has been a large drop-off in the number of women part-time students. What progress can we make in that area, particularly in the teaching, nursing and caring professions, which women often go into after they have had their families?

Justine Greening: There are two areas in which the Bill can particularly help. First, it will provide transparency and give us a clearer sense of who is entering and going through our university system. One of the functions of the office for students will be to improve transparency, which will help us not only to improve access but to widen participation. Secondly, some of the financing changes will free up opportunities for people who find it harder to go to university because they cannot get the finance for a course. The Bill will allow us to take those two steps forward.

We are going further than Labour ever did to strengthen access agreements. Under the Bill, institutions wanting to charge tuition fees above the basic level will have to agree plans that look at participation as well as at access. We want to ensure they are doing everything they can to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds throughout their course to reduce the number of drop-outs and help all students into fulfilling careers.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I join other hon. Members in welcoming the Secretary of State to her new post. On enabling students to access higher education, there is one group that has not been able to access it—Muslim students whose religious beliefs prevent them from taking out a loan. I know she will point to the new provisions in the Bill on sharia-compliant loans, but why does she believe that this specifically requires legislation? Many of these students have been waiting years, if not decades, to be able to go to university. Why is she making them wait even longer?

Justine Greening: The Bill puts in place the powers that we need to take a more flexible approach to funding. As the hon. Lady says, some students are less likely to want to take out a conventional student loan. We need to respond to that if we are to widen participation, and that is precisely what the Bill does. It will actually achieve the aims she talks about.

We will have transparency, which will require higher education institutions to publish application, offer and progression rates by gender, ethnic background and socioeconomic class. Across all its functions, the office for students will have to take into account the need to promote equality of opportunity across the whole lifecycle for disadvantaged students, not just access.

Academic autonomy is the bedrock of success for our higher education sector. The Bill introduces measures to safeguard the interests of students and taxpayers, while protecting academic freedom and institutional autonomy. It enables the OfS to be independent of Government and the sector, as a regulator should be. It will be an arm’s length non-departmental public body, just as the Higher Education Funding Council for England is now.

The office for students will operate a risk-based approach to regulation by concentrating regulation where it is needed and ensuring the highest standards are maintained across the sector, while reducing the regulatory burden
on the best performing institutions. If a university is doing well, it should not have to worry so much about bureaucrats peering over its shoulder.

However, one important aspect of such risk-based regulation will be a more flexible approach to degree-awarding powers. We will move away from the one-size-fits-all approach, which currently requires smaller, specialist institutions to demonstrate that they can award degrees in any subject, and requires new providers—including some of the very best overseas institutions—to spend four years building up a track record in England, irrespective of a long record of excellence elsewhere in the global academic world.

The provision to vary degree-awarding powers will enable specialist institutions to gain such powers only in the subject areas in which they have an interest or a need. It will enable the office for students to give degree-awarding powers on a probationary basis to institutions that can clearly demonstrate their capability and have a credible plan to ensure they meet the full degree-awarding powers criteria after three years. As part of that, the OfS will require clear and robust protections for students when granting probationary degree-awarding powers.

Liam Byrne: The Secretary of State is being characteristically generous in giving way. Is it her expectation that many of our great further education colleges that are already providing higher education will be able to acquire their own degree-awarding abilities, in a much more generous way than is currently possible, as a result of this change?

Justine Greening: Broadly, the rule that 55% of students need to be studying on degree courses will remain. In the end, however, what we are trying to do more broadly with these changes is to open up the chance for new high-quality institutions to join existing high-quality institutions in our higher education sector in being able to offer degrees.

Wes Streeting: The Secretary of State is being very generous in giving way for a second time. She may not have seen the policy advice, but a briefing was caught on a long-lens camera outside No. 10 back in April. It said that the Government’s plans risk “creating poor quality provision for marginal students”.

What is she going to do to mitigate that risk?

Justine Greening: The Bill is about ensuring that we have a strong, robust, successful, innovative and high-quality higher education sector for Britain’s young people. The hon. Gentleman sets out problems and then suggests we should not bring forward a Bill to tackle them.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): It strikes me that the Secretary of State is giving a lot of good detail on the safeguards, which should satisfy most reasonable people. Others may feel there is something of a closed shop on degree-awarding powers, and I am very glad that the Bill will, among other things, do its best to break it down. Such a closed shop is unacceptable, particularly in relation to global education provision, which, as she says, we benefit from and can push out to other parts of the world.

Justine Greening: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. For the many institutions that have spent years working steadily to get their own degree-awarding powers, these changes will be welcome. They should not have to wait so long, and once the Bill is passed, they will not have to do so.

Mark Field: I suspect institutions that have spent many years trying to get degree-awarding powers and have not quite got them will feel that they have spent a frustratingly long time doing so. None the less, I am sure this provision will be welcomed in the years to come by many of the institutions she is talking about.

Justine Greening: I am sure my right hon. Friend is right.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab) rose—

Justine Greening: I will make a bit more progress, because I recognise that many hon. Members want to contribute to this debate. I will give way in a second, but it is important that I briefly set out for the House how the OfS will be able to act when students and taxpayers are not well served. When there are grounds to suspect a serious breach of a provider’s conditions of registration or funding, the office for students will have the power to enter and search a higher education provider, subject to the crucial safeguard that a court warrant must be obtained first.

Mr Cunningham rose—

Justine Greening: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman because he has been trying to catch my eye, but I must then try to make some progress on this long Bill.

Mr Cunningham: I have two universities in my constituency. What did the Secretary of State mean when she said that other institutions can share in these changes? I was not clear what she meant.

Justine Greening: I was talking about the changes to degree-awarding powers. For institutions that may currently feel they cannot go down this route because it is simply too complex and long-winded, we will open up the sector to enable great institutions to step up to become, over time, an institution that awards degrees directly and then for excellent institutions to become, after a further three years, a university. This is important for Britain. If we are to be a country in which our young people have the number of places they want at high-quality institutions, with the range of different degrees that they want and that our economy needs, it is important to have a higher education sector that can respond and that is what the Bill seeks to address.

The Bill enables the OfS to require registered higher education providers to have a student protection plan in place. Students will want to know what to expect from their providers if their course of study cannot be delivered. Although some providers currently have student protection plans, the new requirement means that students of all registered providers will be protected.

This Government believe that no one with the necessary ability should be denied a place at university. That is why, for the first time ever, we are providing direct...
financial support for those undertaking postgraduate masters study. We also intend to extend direct financial support to postgraduate doctoral study and to introduce part-time maintenance loans comparable to those we give to full-time students.

The Bill will make significant improvements to higher education and research, but let me reassure the House that none of these changes will be delivered by undermining other routes into highly skilled employment. We are committed to creating 3 million apprenticeships by 2020, and the Government recently launched the skills plan, which is our response to Lord Sainsbury’s independent review of technical education, setting out an ambitious overhaul of the post-16 skills system. Taken as a whole, those changes will allow young people to make well-informed decisions about their futures, giving them every opportunity to achieve their potential and, at the same time, improving the quality, relevance and value of learning.

I have talked a lot today about teaching and students, but the UK is also a world leader in research and innovation. Established and emerging economies alike look on in envy not just at the quality and breadth of our research, but at our incredible track record of turning innovative ideas into life-changing, marketable products and services. The Government are protecting science resource funding at its current level of £4.7 billion, which will rise in cash terms every year for the rest of the Parliament. At the same time, we are investing in new scientific infrastructure on a record scale, delivering on the £6.9 billion science capital commitment in our manifesto.

Few people understand the research landscape better than the Nobel prize-winning geneticist Sir Paul Nurse. Aside from being an inspirational example of how social mobility can happen in our country, last year he completed an independent review of our seven research councils, recommending that the seven existing bodies be brought together into a single body. The Bill will make his recommendation of “a formal organisation...which can support the whole system to collectively become more than the sum of its parts” a reality.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Coventry University, Birmingham City University and the University of Wolverhampton recently launched a partnership to bring together their applied research and training expertise. Will the Secretary of State ensure that the measures in the Bill to implement Paul Nurse’s recommendations support such innovative collaboration, so that, as she says, the public investment in our research can add up to more than the sum of its parts?

Justine Greening: The Bill will help in two ways. Not only will it naturally bring the research councils together under one umbrella organisation; it will give that organisation a much more powerful voice when developing links with the business community. I know from the time I spent in industry before entering the House that the link in Britain between academia and research and business is a strong one, but one that can be strengthened further. As we consider how our country will be successful as we navigate through the Brexit process, making the most not only of our young people’s talents, but of our most world-class research institutions and the brains within them will be key.

The Bill will bring into being a new body called UK Research and Innovation that will strengthen the strategic approach to future challenges, while maximising the value of the Government’s investment of more than £6 billion a year in research and innovation. UKRI will provide a strong, unified voice for the UK’s research and innovation funding system on the global stage, cementing Britain’s world-leading position. UKRI and the Office for Students will work closely together to ensure that there is a co-ordinated, strategic approach to the funding of teaching and research in England.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Welsh universities have traditionally had an awful deal out of the seven research councils structure. In 2014-15, we received 2% of the total budget, whereas our population share would demand at least 5%. Does the Secretary of State think that that 2% is fair for Welsh universities, and what will the new structure do to address the situation? Would it not be better to create four research councils for the four component parts of the British state and Barnett-ise the funding?

Justine Greening: The Bill is about strengthening our capacity to do world-beating research. The money will follow where the excellence is. I have no doubt that there is significant excellence in Wales. That is why there has been significant funding for some of our world-class research that is taking place in that part of the UK. The Bill is about enabling the seven research councils to add up to more, as Sir Paul Nurse said, by bringing them under one umbrella.

The Bill will ensure that the UK is equipped to carry out more multidisciplinary research and to better respond with agility and flexibility to the latest research challenges. By bringing Innovate UK into UKRI, we will harness the opportunities across business as well, so that business-led innovation and world-class research can better come together and translate our world-class knowledge into world-class innovation. Innovate UK will retain its individual funding stream and continue its support for business-led technology and innovation.

We are protecting in law, for the first time ever, the dual-support research funding system in England—a system that many people consider to have underpinned universities’ confidence to invest in long-term research and that has contributed to our well-deserved global reputation for excellence.

The formation of UKRI will provide crucial support during this period of change in our relationship with the European Union. As we face new challenges, we need a strong and unified voice to represent the interests of the research and innovation community across Government, across Europe and around the world.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Unison, the union, has about 40,000 workers in higher education institutions, which represents a great range of staff. It is very concerned, as am I, that the vote to leave the European Union has produced real uncertainty that will create challenges in terms of funding, research, staffing and students. It asks a question that I would like to put...
to the Secretary of State: why is there a rush to do this? Should we not look at the new landscape, think very carefully and then decide what we should do?

**Justine Greening:** I do not agree with the hon. Lady. I believe we have to face the challenge that we have to make sure that the universities sector and the higher education sector more broadly come out of the process of Brexit stronger. That is why we are engaging in a structured way across Government and outside Government in sectors such as HE to ensure that we have a smart approach to taking Britain through the Brexit process. I refer her to the point that the University Alliance made earlier today about the Bill being "a raft that can take us to calmer waters".

The Bill is how we will provide the security, vision and direction for a strong higher education sector.

**Liz McInnes** *(Heywood and Middleton) (Lab)* rose—

**Jo Stevens** rose—

**Justine Greening:** I have taken an awful lot of interventions, but I must now make some progress and allow the debate to continue.

Our universities are world class and our researchers are world beating. That is because over the years, over the decades and over the centuries, they have evolved and adapted to face the challenges and changes of the world around them—the world that they do much to study, understand and explain. We have to make the bold moves that are needed to secure their success for many more years to come. These changes are about further unlocking and unleashing the talents of our people and our best brains. I want the young people of today and tomorrow to be given every opportunity to succeed. That is why I am proud to put the Bill before the House. I pay tribute to the Minister for Universities and Science, who has done so much work to get the Bill to this stage.

The Higher Education and Research Bill will put more information and more choice in the hands of students. It will promote social mobility so that every person in this country has the opportunity to make the most of themselves. It will boost productivity in the economy as we realise our future outside the European Union. It will enhance and cement our position in the economy as we realise our future outside the European Union. It will promote social mobility so that every person in this country has the opportunity to make the most of themselves. It will boost productivity in the economy as we realise our future outside the European Union. It will enhance and cement our position in the economy as we realise our future outside the European Union. It will promote social mobility so that every person in this country has the opportunity to make the most of themselves. It will boost productivity in the economy as we realise our future outside the European Union. It will enhance and cement our position in the economy as we realise our future outside the European Union.

The Prime Minister told us last week that “together we will build a better Britain”. I am clear that education has to be at the forefront of that. Our universities deserve the best, our students deserve the best and our researchers and innovators deserve the best, so that they can play their role in building that better Britain. The Bill will provide them with nothing less than the best, and I commend it to the House.

Mr Gordon Marsden: I congratulate the Secretary of State and welcome her to her position. We look forward to the development of her thoughts on the subject.

The Bill has positive elements, which the Opposition welcome. The recognition and identification of social mobility as a key factor in the expansion of higher education is important. It is crucial that we create a system that works for social mobility not just for young people, but for adults. The introduction of a transparency duty for university admissions will be a good start, but more must be done.

We welcome the promise at last of an alternative student finance method, as pledged in the White Paper. We hope that it addresses the concerns of Muslim students about a lack of sharia-compliant funding. The Opposition had to press the Government hard on that issue during the maintenance grants debate in January, as my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) has made clear. I am pleased that, finally, it has been taken on board.

I praise the Minister for Universities and Science for his strong and consistent advocacy of the importance that the EU has had for universities in the UK. During the referendum campaign, he spoke trenchantly against Brexit, saying that “we’re potentially confronted with a funding black hole roughly equivalent to the size of one of our world-class research councils”.

He also said that ditching membership would mean “losing a seat at the table when the big decisions about funding and priorities are made”.

There’s the rub. The reality is that our world and the education world are utterly changed since 23 June. That makes all the concerns and criticisms that the Opposition and others have voiced on the Bill much more powerful, but we find that the Government are still groping for answers. The Bill too often produces 20th century answers to 21st century challenges. It is laced with an obsession for market-led ideology that does not reflect the realities in higher education or those of the post-Brexit world.

Mark Field: As someone who was on the same side of the debate for the 23 June referendum, I recognise the concerns about leaving the EU. However, we must look to the future. There are great opportunities. One of the great things about our higher education system is that it is focused very much on being a global operator, particularly given the strength of the English language. Therefore, there will be tremendous opportunities. It is a difficult, unpredictable and uncertain time, but none the less a time that is open for and ripe with opportunities for our best higher education institutions.

Mr Marsden: I welcome what the hon. Gentleman says and the fact that he spoke so staunchly on the part of the remain campaign. The fact remains, as it were, that the Government have not put forward a pathway. I will talk about that later.

Everything one needs to know about that obsession can be found in one small section towards the start of the White Paper, which states that “we need to confront the possibility of some institutions choosing – or needing – to exit the market. This is a crucial part of a healthy, competitive and well-functioning market, and such exits happen already – although not frequently – in the higher education sector. The Government should not prevent exit as a matter of policy...and it will remain the provider’s decision whether to exit and their responsibility to implement and action any exit plans.”
Such breezy complacency and laissez-faire attitudes would be comical were it not for the dire consequences that they threaten for thousands of students and dozens of research and higher education institutions.

The Government have made great play of their new teaching excellence framework as a way of strengthening HE’s offer to students. The Opposition of course approve of moves to value excellence in teaching—who could not?—and we approve of the concept of measuring teaching quality, but the lack of detail on how it will work is added to by concerns that the Government are using the TEF as a potential Trojan horse for removing the fee cap. If that happens, it could bring in its wake a two-tier system and a very damaging separation between teaching and research institutions.

We are strongly opposed to linking the TEF with fees, as are the majority of higher education institutions, respondents to the Green Paper, which is why the Secretary of State was so coy in saying that only the best people believe in it. We are strongly opposed because, in the first year, it would allow almost all universities or HE providers to charge an automatic index-linked inflation increase to students. That is particularly problematic post-Brexit, with the fragility of our economy. There are no guarantees on the level of inflation for the next few years. Therefore, students could face significant increases in fees—the Government cannot guarantee otherwise.

In any case, as the White Paper makes clear, all bets are off, because we do not know what further increases will be permitted by the second and third stages of the TEF. The University and College Union and others are deeply concerned by the lack of parliamentary scrutiny built into the TEF. By putting key aspects of the TEF proposals out for consultation separately from the Bill, the Government are denying Parliament the chance to debate the vital aspects of the plan in full. The equality impact assessments the Government have published otherwise.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that the link between the TEF and fees means that universities will be made more accountable for any increase in fees?

Mr Marsden: There is no evidence for that. The point is that, if universities have a fees case to make, they should make it. A number of universities have already said—I will say more about this shortly—that they do not wish to pursue that link. It is telling that the House of Commons Library briefing says of the impact assessment:

“The material in the assessment is nearly all qualitative. The impact of few, if any, of the policies are explicitly quantified.”

The TEF in its current format will not provide assessment by course. The equality analysis states that the “TEF will recognise both part-time and full-time teaching quality” but there are no details on how that will happen. Institutions such as Birkbeck and the Open University, which teach a wide range of students from more varied educational backgrounds, have concerns that they may not be dealt with in the same way as students from more traditional backgrounds.

Rebecca Pow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Marsden: I will make progress and come to the hon. Lady presently.

Long-established institutions such as Cambridge University have said quite straightforwardly that they do not support the link between the TEF and fees. Cambridge University states: “it is bound to affect student decision-making adversely, and in particular it may deter students from low income families from applying to the best universities”.

No wonder the Government’s equality analysis had to resort to newspeak, saying that “TEF is expected to benefit students regardless of their… characteristics”, in an attempt to meet their public equality duty.

Mike Wood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Rebecca Pow rose—

Mr Marsden: I will give way to the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow).

Rebecca Pow: As someone who has put two daughters through university and who has a son who is thinking about where to go, I believe it is essential that more focus is put on the quality of what is offered at universities. That is what the Bill fundamentally tries to work in, which I applaud.

Mr Marsden: There is absolutely nothing wrong with quality, but we have to see where the quality extends. The truth is that that is not clear in the TEF before us.

In addition to the first year, we know that only the simplest of tests will be available to allow HE institutions to obtain tuition fee increases. In essence, it is a cash-in coupon. There are no guarantees about where that will take us in fee changes in years two and three. It is therefore not surprising that the vice-chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire, Bill Rammell, who is a former HE Minister—[Interruption.] When the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury, the right hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr Evennett), stops barracking from the Front Bench, he might find that one or two respondents to the Bill have close connections with the Government and the Conservative party. It is not surprising that Bill Rammell says that the TEF proposal “risks the commoditisation of higher education”, even if the Government have had to row back from their original plans.

It took about six years in the early 2000s to get a broadly acceptable framework for measuring research quality with the research excellence framework. Simply using existing datasets and metrics in teaching such as the national student survey will not on its own do the business. The Business, Innovation and Skills Committee said that the use of metrics as proxies for quality was problematic. Although the White Paper claims that TEF awards will add up to £1 billion in 10 years, there are no cost predictions. The Government are proceeding on the assumption that there will be only one TEF assessment per university—a one-size-fits-all approach that has been criticised by a wide range of commentators,
not least at the all-party parliamentary group meeting that the Minister spoke at last December. Where is the recognition of that, and where is the strategy for finessing that assessment, which could perhaps be done by schools of humanities, science, social science and so on?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous and I do not doubt his commitment to improving higher and further education, but for the life of me I cannot understand what his argument is with the teaching excellence framework. He begins by attacking the Government for extensive consultation and then attacks the Government for being too narrow and rigid in their application. Which is it: are the Government too open-minded or too narrow-minded? Can he enlighten the House?

Mr Marsden: From a right hon. Gentleman who has demonstrated his ability to turn on not one but several sixpences in the past few weeks, I think that that is a little rich. I will, however, deal with his particular point. It is not a question of saying that we do not support the teaching excellence framework. What we are saying is, “This is the Government and these are your Ministers. Bring forward the material to demonstrate it is going to work.” So far, they have not done so.

Amanda Milling: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Marsden: No, I will make some more progress.

The higher education White Paper emphasises repeatedly that the driver for the changes is that half of job vacancies from now until 2022 are expected to be in occupations requiring high-level graduate skills, but there is little clarity on what that means. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) asked earlier, does that include levels of technical professional competence? If so, why is there no strong linkage with the skills plan released by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills just two weeks ago? There is an obvious need for crossover between the skills plan and the higher education Bill, but the disconnect between them makes even less sense now that the Department for Education will be taking on skills and further education policy. If the opportunity for students at 16 and beyond to switch between higher education and vocational routes is to be real, why is the skills plan not linked directly with the HE White Paper?

A recent University and College Union survey showed that less than 10% of respondents recalled learning anything in school about higher education before year 9, or having any contact with a university. The Education Committee I served on and Peter Lampl at Sutton Trust have said for a number of years that it is imperative we give young people the aspirations they need at a much earlier age, so that they can make more informed choices about their future educational plans. I would like to see much more about that in the Bill, as I am sure would the rest of the House.

There are also huge question marks, following the changes to the mechanisms of government, about where the money is coming from. Will it all transfer over from the new Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy? With the existing cuts across that Department, where will the resources to implement these wonderful changes come from, especially since the Department has huge school funding issues to fix?

The Government strategy for expanding HE and skills rests on their “loans will cure all” philosophy. As we have already seen, however, that is no guarantee. Less than 50% of the money allocated to the 24-plus advanced learner loans was taken up because of resistance from older learners. BIS had to return £150 million unused to the Treasury. On top of that, students have already been hit in the past 12 months by the triple whammy of scrapping maintenance grants for loans, freezing the student loan threshold and removing NHS bursaries. That has damaged social mobility for the most disadvantaged students.

The Bill places immense faith in the magic of the market. Central to its proposals are a concentration on creating a brave new world of what the Government are calling HE challenger institutions, which are likely to be private and for-profit. Before any Government Member jumps up, let me say that we are not in any way, shape or form opposed to new institutions. [Interruption.] The Secretary of State has had her say. I speak as someone who taught for nearly 20 years in what was a new institution, the Open University, which is one of the proudest boasts of the Labour Government under Harold Wilson. We will take no lessons from Conservative Members on that. The Government propose that new providers could be given degree-awarding powers straight away. Students would in effect be taking a gamble on probationary degrees from probationary providers. Who is going to pick up the pieces if it all goes wrong? It is still unclear what resources the proposed office for students will have to police this progress. What if the problems are not picked up until students have been working for their degrees for, say, 18 months? As I have said previously, the White Paper chirrups about the “possibility of exit being a natural part of a healthy market”, but students are not market traders and they do not easily slip a second time into the womb of higher education when they have been let down by that new shiny market.

Cutting corners in the process of becoming a higher education provider also poses a serious risk to staff and students, and increases the risk of public money being misused. We know that in 2011 concerns around BPP and the Apollo group caused the previous Secretary of State, David Willetts, to pause a major extension. Previous expansion of private providers in other jurisdictions has already affected the reputation of their higher education systems, with reports of phantom students, fraud and low quality of education. As Research Fortnight argued in May:

“The government’s proposed reforms are being billed as bold and innovative but in fact they are no such thing.”

It says the wording “proportionate for the Bill’s regulatory aspects” is “code for light touch” and that “instead…the UK government has instead decided to emulate a model from which many in the rest of the world want to escape.”

Encouraging universities or new providers is important, but “the title of university needs to be seen as a privilege…not an automatic entitlement” and, “in the long term it is quality that is at risk if the proposed legislation becomes law.”
The White Paper says that all institutions will have an exit plan for their students, but how will it work? The Government’s own equality assessment admits:

“Ethnic minority students are more likely to come from a disadvantaged background which may mean that they cannot access the same financial or social resources as white British students in the event of a course or campus closure. We therefore expect”— not “demand” or “will organise”— “protection plans to have a greater impact on this group.”

**Margaret Greenwood:** On potential closures, does my hon. Friend agree that this is of particular concern to mature students choosing to study in universities in their immediate locality? Because they have to continue to work, support children and family members and so forth, a closure would create extreme difficulties for them.

**Mr Marsden:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to bring us back to the nub of the issue, which is the family circumstances of the people affected.

In those blithe phrases from the equality assessment lurks the potential for hundreds of broken careers and dashed hopes of social mobility. As serious is the reputational damage that failed challenger institutions or scandals associated with them could do to universities as a UK international brand. The Government’s White Paper was already blasé about the potential knock-on effects for UK plc of their sweeping changes. HE providers across England and the devolved nations of Britain are internationally competitive because they are seen as part of a tried and trusted UK brand. There needs to be a UK-wide strategy in place to safeguard that. As we emerge into a post-Brexit world, it will be even more vital, if we want our UK brand to shine as brightly as possible, that we reassure Scotland and Northern Ireland, especially where there remain unresolved tensions over research between UKRI and the new England-only bodies.

The Government say that the office for students will cover access and participation, but what concrete action there will be to match the rhetoric remains unseen. There remain major concerns about how quality assurance will be affected by the merger of the functions of HEFCE and the QAA. The Government have consistently undermined their own rhetoric on widening participation with cuts to ESOL—English for speakers of other languages—adult skills and social mobility funding for universities, alongside their disastrous decision to scrap maintenance grants for loans, for which we held them to account in this Chamber in January.

Peter Lampl and the Sutton Trust, who have championed that access for more than a decade, repeated their fears in their briefing on the Bill, including, specifically—this has been alluded to but the Secretary of State was unable to give an answer—the fact that English students have the highest level of debt in the English-speaking world. The figures are: £44,000 on graduation and over £50,000 for those requiring maintenance loans.
Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is being exceptionally generous in giving way. In improving access to higher education, is not improving the quality of secondary education one of the most important things? Is it not a great tribute to our previous Prime Minister and to the previous Education Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), that there are now 1.4 million more children in good and outstanding schools who now have the chance to go to university and achieve great things?

Mr Marsden: I am always happy to applaud excellence in the secondary sector, but it is a little rich coming from the right hon. Gentleman, given that he and his predecessor presided over a system in which level 4 schoolchildren were denied automatic access to work experience, which would have built up their skills and capacity to take some of these positions.

Margaret Greenwood: On quality in schools, does my hon. Friend agree that there is also the issue of access to further education, particularly adult education? I used to teach on an access to higher education course in a college for adults. When it comes to accessing higher education, that sort of provision is invaluable, particularly for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, but sadly the Bill is very short on anything to do with lifelong learning and part-time education.

Mr Marsden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I intend to remedy that as best I can in my remaining remarks.

In the briefing for the Bill, the Office for Fair Access emphasises that it needs to retain the ultimate authority to approve or refuse access agreements. It is timely to emphasise that OFS board members should have expertise around social mobility and fair access. The Bill’s introduction of a transparency duty for higher education applications is positive, but as the Sutton Trust said in May, the Government’s record on improving social mobility is poor. We agree with the National Union of Students that the Government need to create a requirement for an annual participation report.

If we want the office for students to be a genuine office for students, there also needs to be a designated place on the board for a student representative. However, it is not only students who are key stakeholders but people working at all levels in our institutions, and that is why I particularly underline what Unison said about the lack of accountable strategic decision making around employers and students remaining a concern. That is something else that the OFS needs to look at.

We cannot get away from the fact that the student position is nowhere near as rosy as the Government are saying. For 20 years, the official position has been that maintenance support is not meant fully to cover the annual costs of living for full-time students. The loans are supposed to be supplemented by earnings or contributions from family. Too little attention has been paid to the other debts that students contract. The debate around increases to tuition fees is important, but the fundamental problem of sustainability also lies in maintenance support and student cost of living. That is why student dissatisfaction levels are so high and so alarming.

I turn now to the issues around the separation of regulation and funding between teaching at OFS and research at the new UKRI body. GuildHE says it that risks undermining some of the positive interaction between teaching and research. I have already set out the risks that allowing challenger institutions degree-awarding powers from day one could have on the quality of our institutions. The regulation needs to be robust, rather than just proportionate, but as I have emphasised when we debated the Government’s scrapping of student maintenance grants earlier this year, FE colleges are a key driver of social mobility. They deliver more than 10% of all HE courses in this country, often to the most disadvantaged students and often in places with a dearth of stand-alone HE provision and a history of low skills in the local economy. They span the country, from the NCG in the north-east to Cornwall college and my own excellent Blackpool and the Fylde college.

Last year, 33,700 English applicants were awarded maintenance grants for HE courses at FE colleges. One would have thought, therefore, that the Government would have seen them as a key element for expansion as part of their array of challenger institutions, yet hidden away in the annex to the impact assessment for the Bill is the Government’s forecast for the number of FE colleges that will be delivering HE as a result of the Bill. The forecast figure for 2027-28 is exactly the same as that projected for 2018-19, whereas other alternative providers are projected to more than double in number. It is true that the Bill will make it easier for FE colleges to get degree-awarding powers, but what comfort will that bring when systematic cuts to colleges’ ESOL provision, adult skills and other areas have reduced the capacity of FE to participate in HE expansion?

In addition, many key HE programmes on which both FE colleges and modern universities rely could be scrapped if up to £725 million of EU money currently going to local enterprise partnerships is lost—money that produces jobs and skills for them and their communities and on which hundreds of courses and staff depend.

Liam Byrne: Would my hon. Friend underline how important this point is? For many of the communities we serve, further education is the critical springboard into higher education. In the great city of Birmingham, we have the grand total of just 100 young people on level 5 apprenticeships. We cannot change that number unless we radically increase the way in which further education and higher education work together. That is why this element of the Bill needs highlighting as so important.

Mr Marsden: My right hon. Friend is so right; in his previous position at this Dispatch Box, he championed that position and continues to champion it excellently today.

We and many others, including the Royal Society, have major concerns about the merger of the science councils and the consequent tensions between the new UK model, English models and the devolved Administrations. It is an issue that seems to unite many people across the piece, whether it be the former President of the Royal Society, Sir Martin Rees, who has said that the plans were “needlessly drastic”; the Academy of Social Sciences, which fears that it will lose autonomy and weaken communication with academics over future
research planning; or Paul Nightingale of the Science Policy Research Unit, who said that it was doubtful whether having an “extra layer of bureaucracy” would help.

We share the concerns of Cambridge University and others that there need to be stronger safeguards for dual funding and protecting the integrity of the QR. To deliver this dual support, there will need to be smooth interaction with the devolved Administrations, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Scottish Funding Council and the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland. However, the Royal Society and others, and indeed the director of the University of Scotland, Alasdair Smith, are very concerned about how this will operate. These changes prompted the Lords Science and Technology Committee to write to the Minister to express its concerns. It has stated that it had serious concerns about the integration of Innovation UK into UK Research and Innovation. It is concerned that Innovation UK should retain its business-facing focus, and the recently distinguished Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, now the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), also asked for clarification on this point.

The proposed changes to the departmental landscape since last week split responsibility for research and teaching across UKRI and the office for students respectively. Two separate frameworks, the research excellence framework and the teaching excellence framework, both lack links to funding.

Now, of course, there are major concerns post-Brexit about how universities are going to fund that research. At present, UK universities receive 10%—just over £1 billion a year—of their research funding from the EU. The Times Higher Education says that 18 UK institutions face losing more than half of their research funding as a result of the decision to leave the European Union. This affects some of our newer universities as well as long-established universities in the Russell Group. That is why Professor Paul Nurse in his research review for the Government warned that leaving the EU jeopardised the world-class science for which the UK is known.

Jo Stevens: I have three universities in my constituency—two new ones and one Russell Group university—and they are very concerned about what is going to happen as a result of Brexit. Does my hon. Friend agree that we have had no reassurance from the Government about the replacement of the funds that currently go to our world-class universities?

Mr Marsden: I am afraid that I would agree. This problem has been amplified by people such as Chris Husbands, the Vice-Chancellor at Sheffield Hallam University, who said that four out of 12 of his research projects are now in jeopardy. These are issues that affect the bread and butter of the whole workforce. We did not think that this Bill was really fit for purpose before 23 June, but the difficulties have been amplified in the wake of the funding uncertainty and instability after the Brexit vote.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
There was much talk about improving social mobility by the previous Government, but little of it has touched on or benefited older and part-time students. The number of part-time students has plummeted by 38% and mature students have dropped by 180,000 since 2010. As the Open University has said:

“Part-time HE is a catalyst for widening participation. It is essential that the new government reaffirms”

their targets. The Secretary of State was quite right to talk about young people from disadvantaged backgrounds improving through part-time education, but that has not been seen for mature students, whose numbers have declined greatly.

The huge challenges are underlined by the latest survey of students by the National Education Opportunity Network, which says that

“over 40% may be choosing different courses and institutions than those they would ideally like to because of cost and restricting the range of institutions they apply to by living at home”.

This Government have talked the talk on widening participation, but they have not walked the walk. It is astonishing that in such a large Bill, they have not put centrally the importance of adult and part-time learning to improving social mobility. Instead, they tucked it away in a couple of paragraphs in the White Paper.

Speaking as someone whose passion for this area was fuelled by nearly 20 years as a course tutor in the Open University, and having cut my teeth as a post-grad with the Workers Education Association, I am proud to endorse, as is this party, an express commitment to part-time HE and adult education in the proposed general duties of the office for students. I have said previously that the worlds of FE, HE and online learning are morphing into each other far quicker than some Whitehall policy makes us realise. If we are not ahead of the curve, the consequences for our economic performance and social cohesion will be severe.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): The hon. Gentleman mentions a number of criticisms of competition in the university sector, but does he not agree with Lord Mandelson, who said in his response to the Government White Paper:

“I welcome this focus on the range of universities...as they are essential for social mobility”?

Mr Marsden: Lord Mandelson and I are at one on that; I welcome a range of universities, but I want to make sure—I am sure most Members would agree—that they do what they say on the tin and can be trusted in the first place. That is the whole point of what we are saying. [Interruption.] I know, from a previous incarnation, that the Whips are trained to say things like that, but the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

The Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury (Mr David Evennett): Wait and see.

Mr Marsden: I will indeed wait and see.

The Government should take into consideration proposals in the new report that has been prepared for the all-party parliamentary group for adult education, “Too important to be left to chance”. They should study the Fabian Society’s new proposals: it recommends gradually doing away with loans via national insurance and education learning accounts. The Open University, City and Guilds, the TUC, the Institute For Public Policy Research, Unionlearn and several other organisations have produced ideas to facilitate both credit transfer and personal career accounts, and I have added my own thoughts. They build on the magisterial 2009 NIACE report “Learning Through Life”, co-authored by Tom Schuller and the late lamented Professor David Watson.

Knowledge is power, as shop stewards and industrial injury lawyers know only too well. Today we have an opportunity, but also a duty, to extend that power through learning to millions of workers across Britain. Lifelong learning should not be “silied”. It contributes to social cohesion, so it is an issue for the Department for Communities and Local Government; it helps people to live longer, so it is an issue for the Department of Health; it helps to return offenders to society, so it is an issue for the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice; and it contributes to preparing economically inactive people to enter a world of work, if that is appropriate.

I have laboured those points because I realise that, given the smaller budgets that the Education Ministers may have, they may have to go to some of the other Departments with the begging bowl if we are to see any progress in this regard.

Knowledge is not merely power, but the key to empowerment. We should be bold in the world of lifelong learning that we offer our citizens for 2020: we should offer practical skills along with pure knowledge. Instead, however, the Government have content to make welcome but incremental changes, while the capacity of adult learning is unravelling further. As was pointed out earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), the Bill contains little reference to the part that devo-max can play in expanding new providers, or to the productivity and job needs of the 21st century. That fear is echoed in the alternative White Paper, which states:

“...a private, for-profit university would have neither an interest in meeting a broader public remit nor the interests of the local economy in which it is located—its primary responsibility will be to its owners, investors and shareholders.”

Instead of looking at urgently needed and constructive ways of reducing the financial fees burden on our students, the Government have produced mechanisms which dodge Parliament’s ability to judge and regulate them. Instead of strengthening and shoring up our universities and higher and further education at a most critical time, they risk seriously undermining them by obsessively pursuing a market ideology. Instead of presenting analysis in the wake of Brexit, offering relief, assurances and strategies to safeguard both research excellence in our traditional and modern universities and the involvement of higher education in the local communities and economies that they serve, the Government have presented no answers to the urgent threats, such as brain drains, that are emerging post-23 June. Instead of strengthening our UK HE brand in the uncertain world in which we must negotiate post-Brexit, they have produced what many regard as a hotchpotch of structures in research and science, with unresolved tensions between new structures for England and the devolved nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They have continually ducked the suggestions made to them about pre-legislative scrutiny, while the Government have produced what many regard as a hotchpotch of structures in research and science, with unresolved tensions between new structures for England and the devolved nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They have continually ducked the suggestions made to them about pre-legislative scrutiny, while the
Given the result of the Brexit referendum and the collapse of the Cameron Government, we see how wise it would have been for the Government to reflect and take time. Instead, they are going hell for leather with a Bill that is obsessed with a toxic combination of market and competition-driven ideology. The small measures of progress and relief that they have offered in respect of social mobility could have provided an opportunity for them to paint a bold new picture of a system that would encourage social cohesion, but instead they have undermined their own social mobility agenda in the ways that I have described.

We could have had a Bill which addressed those issues, and which would have commanded wide support across the House and among the institutions that supply HE and research, but instead, after a week in which the very structures of the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills have been turned upside down, we are pressing on as if nothing had happened. Maynard Keynes famously said:

“When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?”

This is not the Bill that this Parliament needs. It is not the Bill that universities and HE institutions needed. It is not the Bill that our country needs—that our countries need. It is a Bill that is currently not fit for purpose. Especially post-Brexit, we need a Bill that will provide direction and structure, and tackle and settle the needs of a crucial part of our national life for the next generation. That is why we cannot support this Bill’s Second Reading tonight.

3.5 pm

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): Let me begin by welcoming the new Secretary of State to her post. It is a great pleasure to see her on the Front Bench, and I think that she has a wonderful job. When she was describing her experience of being the first member of her family to go to university, I was reminded of the fact that the same was true of me. I remember heading down from Northumberland to Nottingham, thinking that I was going fairly far south until I met students who were arriving in Nottingham, but had travelled north. I was quite intrigued by that.

I enjoyed my time at university, as did the Secretary of State. As she said, getting to university really does matter, and for those who do, it is a fabulous experience. The point of our debate today is really to ensure that more people can do it, and more can be successful.

I also welcome the creation of a large “super-Department for Education”. It always struck me as absolutely barmy that the last Government but one, Gordon Brown’s Government, severed the Department and created a wasteland for post-16s. We never quite knew who was doing what, how it was being done, or who was funding it—quite apart from the fact that the link between schools, colleges and universities was effectively broken. The creation of this new Department is, I think, a fabulous step in the right direction. I remember discussing these issues with my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), and I think he would concur with what I have just said. As a former Secretary of State for Education, he is well placed to do that.

So here we are, with the right kind of Department. As Chair of the Education Committee, I am also pleased to note that I have even more to do, because the sector that we are discussing today is so very important. There is nothing more important than ensuring that the higher education sector thrives and prospers. I will give several reasons for that, but the obvious one is connected with social mobility and social justice. The brutal fact is that it is an abhorrent waste that there are people who could go to university in other circumstances but who cannot do so. That is completely unacceptable. We must have a society in which people who can, should and do want to go somewhere can go there. That is our job. It is not acceptable for groups of people, or individuals among groups of people, to be trapped.

Jo Stevens: On that basis, how does the hon. Gentleman justify the removal of national health service bursaries?

Mr Carmichael: I do think it important to attract people to the NHS. I think that today we should be concentrating on the Bill as it stands, but our Committee will certainly consider that issue in due course.

Let me return to my point about social justice and the need to extend it to all, because that is critical. In particular, we need to extend it throughout the country, to regions, areas and localities that have, in effect, been surrounded by a wall: a wall against hope, a wall against opportunity, a wall against achievement.

That leads me to my second key point. The Bill is also about productivity, because that is a critical issue as well. A society in which people can feel included, feel able to express themselves, and feel able to get the jobs and opportunities that they want must be a society that is also based on an economic, productive model. Productivity equals more opportunity, because it means people having more skills, being able to command a higher salary, and being able to do things that they could not otherwise do—so the productivity argument is at the core of why we have to improve our university sector in the way this Bill seeks.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that productivity is also linked to research and development, in particular R and D projects with Europe? There is a concern. The vice-chancellor of Warwick University thinks that withdrawal from Europe might have an impact on some of the projects it gets finance for. Will the hon. Gentleman’s Committee look at that, or has it already looked at that consequence?

Neil Carmichael: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It is essential that we have R and D, and if we look at the comparators between ourselves and other countries that we are competing with we find some areas where we could and should be doing better—so the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

I want to make a point about productivity. The important point about the German economy, which according to the OECD is 28% more productive than ours, is that businesses, companies and professions understand that human resources—people—are the things that really matter. I shall give an example to show how I know that. I once went to a car factory in Lower Saxony, east Germany. It had been built from the ashes of the collapse of the communist regime, and it was
producing Porsche cars. I asked the factory manager what the supply chain looked like, and he said, “I can show you”. He showed me the typical things from Bosch and Pirelli and all the rest, but colleges and universities—people—were also part of the supply chain. That is a very important point, because it shows that if we are really going to be productive and drive through the growth we need, we must consider the human resources. In making sure that we do so, this Bill is a huge step in the right direction.

James Cleverly: My alma mater, the University of West London, has relentlessly nurtured a relationship with the industries into which its graduates go. It tailors its courses to the needs of those industries and there is a real symbiotic relationship between the industries and the university. Is that a model we should be looking to expand across our higher education sector?

Neil Carmichael: That is a very good point and I was going to loop that in with devolution and so forth. My hon. Friend makes a powerful point: it is very important that our universities are connected to businesses and professions. I would make two further points. First, through devolution and making sure universities become dominant the partners of cities and other regions, they will be able to make those links, develop those stakeholding opportunities and contribute to the world of research and development that is so important beyond the university itself.

Secondly, we must recognise that businesses and professions have an interest in investing in universities and we should encourage them to do so both in the traditional way of supplying capital and in the most sensible way, which is supporting students to go to university, stay at university and develop research opportunities. There are steps in this Bill to make that happen, which is why I welcome it.

I like the idea that the office of students will be able to start helping to shape the new universities and create access to the degree subjects we need. That chimes with the knowledge I and everybody else now has that certain skill sectors are woefully undersupplied. We need to develop the university sector to help put that right. It is important that we develop that relationship.

I also welcome the fact that this Bill is saluting the Nurse review, which is an important contribution to the debate. I can see an opportunity for the Education Committee to have yet another hearing on who might be in charge of UK Research and Innovation, and I look forward to that given our recent experience. That structure needs to be user-friendly in the sense that it must engage with the world of research and all those interested in science, because we must remember that getting IP in the right place is important, as is recognising the value of IP and that there are sometimes questions about who owns IP and who is going to benefit from it. We need to set up a system that looks good and is able to deliver that structure.

I also want to talk about the question of destinations. We think about it all the time when we think of schools because increasingly it is destinations from schools that matter, rather than just qualifications and assessments. Destinations should definitely have a place. That is why I am pleased about the teaching framework, as I think it will help us shape the destination issue in a very interesting way.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Does the hon. Gentleman accept, however, that part of that process could be further education or regional colleges, as opposed to just universities, and that they have an important part to play in their relationship not only with schools, but with universities, so that teaching can be upgraded in some of them?

Neil Carmichael: Yes, of course I do. Colleges do produce foundation degrees, for example, and that has a logical link and extension to universities. The relationship between larger colleges and universities should be allowed to develop and be encouraged, because that is exactly the kind of fluid way in which we can address the question of getting the skills we need.

I want to end on a subject that is also critical: making sure we think about the world of education in a linear way, from start to finish. That is why I am so pleased to welcome the creation of this new Department. I wrote about it a few years ago, and hoped it would happen, and now it has. There were several reasons why I hoped it would happen. One of them is that we do need to see universities and colleges thinking more about what their relationship is with schools and academies. That is a key issue, and the direction of travel goes the other way, too. That will help us understand more about what the labour market and the skills requirements are.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend the Chairman of the Select Committee is making, as ever, a compelling argument. I want to associate myself with the point he has just made about universities and higher education institutions playing more of a role in our schools. Does he agree that the leadership shown by Baroness Alison Wolf in ensuring that King’s College, London sponsors a maths school—an outstanding new free school—is exactly the model other universities should seek to emulate, and that if vice-chancellors want to show they are committed to social inclusion and social mobility they should sponsor more free schools and academies?

Neil Carmichael: That is an interesting intervention and I was coming on to that area, because the world of education is not just boxed up into different sections; it is linear. We need to see more mixing up of people within the sector. There is value in vice-chancellors knowing more about schools and academies and in lecturers getting more involved in schools. I also want to emphasise the value of businesses and professions going along as well. That will mean we get an education system that knows more about what is needed out in the world, that is more comfortable with itself in delivering those things, and that is reaching out to the people who most desperately need to be reached out to—those whom I described as being locked into places where they should not be and being deprived of opportunity and hope. That is what we have to put right on this journey we are embarking upon with the Second Reading of this Bill.

The Committee I chair will look at a lot of issues raised by the Opposition; I have taken note of one or two of them, because I want my Committee and this House to get this Bill right, as it is an important Bill. It viewed through the prism of Brexit the Bill is even more important. Brexit is a call to arms for our education system. We will have to provide more of the skills that
we need because we will not necessarily be able to rely on the European Union to do that for us, and that must be in the back of our mind when we think about higher education, or indeed about all education.

3.19 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The SNP joins other parties in having concerns about the Bill. We do not dispute that some aspects of higher education need reviewing, and we welcome attempts to increase diversity and access to higher education. The Bill aims to transform the HE landscape, but it does not go far enough in terms of diversity, and it poses a serious threat to the international reputation of the UK HE sector. To press ahead with the Bill at a time when HE is already experiencing great uncertainty due to Brexit is reckless and will cause further damage.

There are significant differences between the higher education sector in Scotland and its counterparts in the rest of the UK. The SNP is supportive of the UK Government’s proposals to improve the standard of teaching through the teaching excellence framework, but it stresses the need to consider Scotland’s unique educational provision. Although Scottish HE providers will not be bound by the Bill, there are concerns that by not participating in the TEF, Scottish universities will be disadvantaged when attracting international students, who are a crucial source of funding for all HE institutions.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I came to this place after working in an educational institution, and I echo my hon. Friend’s sentiments about the value of international students. Does she agree that that value is much more than just financial, and that all our students will lose out if attracting international students becomes a problem?

Carol Monaghan: I agree 100% with my hon. Friend. Diversity in our institutions and what we learn from overseas students enrich the experience for all students in higher education.

International students who are considering a move to a UK university could view an English university with a strong TEF rating as offering a better experience than a Scottish university with no TEF rating. Since the TEF will be grounded in quality assurance scores, and given that Scotland has a distinct quality assurance system, recognition of Scotland’s enhancement-led institutional reviews, and benchmarking those reviews against TEF ratings, would allow institutions in Scotland to continue to compete on a level playing field when attracting international students.

It is important to exercise caution around the use of metrics to judge quality of teaching. Certain metrics—graduate salary or student satisfaction, for example—can drive university behaviour in a negative way, as higher education institutions are incentivised to sacrifice certain subjects in favour of areas that produce more positive results in the criteria being measured. Courses that are more challenging and perhaps score lower in student satisfaction metrics—for example, vital STEM courses—could end up being dropped because they do not measure well on the TEF metrics. If metrics are to be used, it is important for our economy that they are carefully honed to ensure that the degrees being taken and the skills developed still meet the overall needs of society.

We should view with caution the drive towards marketisation of the student experience. Giving the power to award degrees to new untested providers on day one is a concern if there is no clear mechanism to ensure that those providers have a track record of delivering quality courses to students. Plans that assist the entry of “for profit” providers and award them the title of “university” will be damaging as the UK competes internationally for students. Perhaps most importantly, those new institutions, which often have no record, will compete for significant numbers of students while allowing them to cherry-pick profitable courses.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I am sure the hon. Lady knows that the National Union of Students is concerned about what we call the creeping privatisation of the university service. We could end up with a situation like the mess we have in the national health service through privatisation by the back door.

Carol Monaghan: All SNP Members share that concern, and we should be worried about the move towards privatisation of the university system.

Courses that are more expensive to deliver—again, I mention STEM courses—will be left to traditional higher education institutions that will either bear that financial burden alone or, worse still, will abandon some of the courses that have earned the UK its worldwide reputation for excellence in that field. New institutions will be allowed to operate without providing services such as libraries or student unions, which are a key part of the student experience at university. Indeed, the Bill permits competition not on equal terms with existing universities, but on substantially reduced terms. The only assumption one can make is that the new providers will put profit before students.

The Government have outlined two models, and with the “low” fee cap of £6,000 we will have universities that potentially offer lower quality provision. At the other end of the scale, the higher fee of £9,000 can further rise with inflation. Where teaching is high quality, that is recognised as a strength of an individual course, not of an institution, yet fees will be the same for all courses in an institution. Creating a system that assesses the quality of a whole institution and allows it to raise the fees for every course based on that assessment when the quality of teaching will vary across departments, is unrealistic. It will create a framework in which students could study courses of lower quality at an institution that was judged to provide “generally” high quality, yet they would, unfairly, be charged higher fees for poor-quality degrees.

Michael Gove: Like the hon. Lady I am a huge admirer of higher education in Scotland, not least because in the middle ages my home town of Aberdeen had as many universities as the whole of England. In its most recent report, the Sutton Trust revealed that Scotland has the worst record of any part of the United Kingdom in admitting students from poorer backgrounds to higher education. What is going on?
Carol Monaghan: The right hon. Gentleman makes a useful intervention because the metrics used by UCAS for higher education in Scotland consider only entries directly from school. In Scotland, however, a large number of students—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds—take alternative routes in.

Tuition fees were trebled in 2012, but there is no evidence to suggest that there has been an improvement in teaching quality or in student satisfaction. The SNP strongly opposes any further increase in fees. We continue to support a system in which entry to university is based on the ability to learn and never on the ability to pay. We have a strong and principled record of opposing increases in tuition fees throughout the UK, and we will reject any Bill that seeks to increase the financial burden on students.

I am happy that the Secretary of State recognises that allowing the marketisation of higher education will increase the possibility of institutions exiting the market. The National Union of Students has raised concerns about the first responsibility of providers that collapse, and asks whether providers will place their responsibilities to their shareholders above their responsibilities to their students. Students might get monetary recompense when a provider collapses, but there is no recognition of the time wasted by students who start a course with an institution that subsequently fails. That time is indeed money for those students, whose careers and earning potential could be delayed while they seek an alternative provider. They are being asked to gamble with their fees and, more importantly, their time. The SNP has at its heart a commitment to higher education, and the idea of prioritising profit over education remains alien to us.

The new emphasis on participation, as well as access, is a positive measure. Plans to place a transparency duty on universities to publish data for students based on their gender, ethnicity and social background are a step in the right direction. I am also pleased that there will be scope to extend student financing to students who do not accept interest-incurred loans, thus creating a sharing-compliant manner of financing for students. But if the Government are going to meet their worthy targets of doubling the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds—take alternative routes in.

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely. Those arrangements can benefit single parents and part-time students, who are often unable to access higher education in the same way that they could in the past.

Clear measures and pathways to enable disadvantaged students to progress have been steadily eroded. The removal of education maintenance allowance and many forms for disadvantaged backgrounds, coupled with cuts to the disabled students allowance, do not match the Government’s ambitions in this area. Thankfully, the picture in Scotland continues to improve, and positive steps have been taken to ensure that access continues to increase. Young people from a disadvantaged background in Scotland are now more likely to participate in higher education than they have ever been in the past. In 2014, 41% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds were able to access higher education in Scotland.

Moving on to research, the commitment to a dual support system for research funding and to the Haldane principle have been widely welcomed by the research community. However, proposals in the Bill to reform the UK research councils could have implications for higher education institutions in Scotland, and we have concerns about the possible short and long-term consequences for Scotland’s research base. The retention of the seven disciplinary research councils is welcome, as mergers or changes to that structure could prove distracting to the research councils and could ultimately have a negative impact on the UK’s research capability. The Royal Society of Edinburgh has said:

“The RSE welcomes the statement that the individual research councils continue to hold their own budgets and provide the leadership for their own disciplines in an autonomous fashion.”

The creation of UK Research and Innovation in the context of a science and research budget will potentially give greater co-ordination across the research councils and we hope that it will offer a stronger voice to the research community in its interaction with the Government. Scotland currently performs well in attracting funding from research councils for grants, studentships and fellowships, with the latest recorded figures showing that Scotland attracted 13% of the UK total in 2012-13. However, research council spending on infrastructure in Scotland in that period amounted to only 5% of UK spending. Similarly, only 7% of Innovate UK funding is spent in Scotland.

We are concerned that the establishment of the UKRI could lead to a lack of consideration among the research councils and Innovate UK’s decision-making bodies of Government priorities and research needs in Scotland and the other devolved nations. Scotland’s research interests and priorities will be better served if the new UKRI board has experience and understanding of the research and innovation landscape and policy across Scotland—as well as the rest of the UK. We therefore ask that the devolved Administrations have representation on the board.

Kirsten Oswald: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should look closely at the interaction between the further and higher education sectors in Scotland and take full account of the way in which they work to encourage participation by groups whose participation is currently limited?

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely. One of the problems found by institutions such as the University of Glasgow is that there is a black hole between different areas of research, so let us hope that the proposals lead to greater collaboration.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend—despite what the annunciator was saying, she is not the hon. Member for Angus—and I visited the University of Glasgow, which is in my constituency and close to hers, to meet the staff of the space research department. They spoke to us at some length about the importance of research mechanisms and the ability of research councils to join funding all the way up. Does she agree that it is important when given the opportunity in a Bill such as this to try to make some progress on those issues?

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely.
Collaboration between research councils and Innovate UK is positive, but Innovate UK’s core mission is different and distinct from that of the research councils. Its bridging role between business and the research community is about stimulating and supporting business innovation, and that mission could be threatened if Innovate UK does not work collaboratively with the academic research community. SMEs currently account for 90% of Scotland’s business base, and we hope that Innovate UK will continue to work with them in its distinct role.

Finally, the impact of the EU referendum has serious implications for the university sector and, given that Scotland clearly voted to remain in the EU, the UK Government must work with the Scottish Government to ensure that Scottish higher education institutes are not adversely affected. In 2014-15, over 13,000 EU students were studying for undergraduate degrees at Scottish universities. At the Science and Technology Committee last week, I asked the Minister for Universities and Science about the status of those students over the next few years, but he was not able to offer a guarantee beyond 2017-18. I call again for an immediate guarantee from the UK Government that all EU students studying in Scotland, and across the rest of the UK, will be able to continue their studies without disruption.

Patrick Grady: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way a second time. After the EU referendum, the University of Glasgow and many other Scottish universities were quick to state how welcome EU students were in their institutions. They went as far as they possibly could to assure students that they would continue welcome them and that they wanted students to complete their courses and remain valuable parts of their institutions. Does my hon. Friend welcome how quickly those institutions responded to the result? Will she press the Government for further reassurance?

Carol Monaghan: I agree 100%. The University of Aberdeen also took the bold step of saying that there would be no change in the status of any EU student—not just those currently studying, but future students looking to attend the university, a point which the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) might like to note.

The Bill does not reflect the impact of Brexit. Scottish institutions have not been offered any assurances that the £217 million of current EU funding will be made up by the UK Government. With the current instability in higher education, this is the wrong time to press ahead with Bill, so the SNP is not able to support it in its current form.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. To help all Members, instead of setting a time limit, if we could do up to 12 minutes, we will all get equal time and we should all be happy.

3.39 pm

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I will try to keep this even shorter, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a great pleasure, as a London MP, to be here with the dynamic duo who have now taken over our education system: my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), who is, unfortunately, not in her place, and my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson). Having sat here for the past two hours, I can confirm that he has slightly blonder hair than she does, although I will allow excuses to be made about that. We have another London Member here, the birthday boy, no less: the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). Mysteriously, when I read The Guardian today I saw that it said he was born in 1972 and I was sure that must have been a misprint—he does not look a day over 55 to me. I look forward to hearing his words later on.

At this point, I should make a brief declaration of interest, in that I have spent the past 11 years on the advisory board of the London School of Commerce, which is a private higher education provider.

Michael Gove: I am sure the House is delighted to hear that my right hon. Friend is a reader of The Guardian, but may I say that I am glad we do not have mandatory reselection in the Conservative party, because such a confession might not endear him to his constituents, and I very much hope he is here for many years to come?

Mark Field: That is very kind. As a vice-chairman of the party, may I say that there might be mandatory reselection in Surrey Heath before too long if we are not careful? I thank my right hon. Friend for the observation. Perhaps this is another Guardian misprint; perhaps that is what the problem has been.

As I was saying, before I was rudely interrupted, my role on the advisory board of the London School of Commerce has been enthralling and interesting. I have watched the development of a private education provider that has dabbled with the idea of having full university status and trying to get degree-awarding powers but has actually expanded overseas. This debate is probably not a great opportunity to talk about the Government’s immigration-related policies, but let me say that I do recognise that they have had an impact on the broader education sector; a school that had some 7,500 students coming from abroad only 10 years ago now has about a third of that number. However, one interesting thing has been that this college provides two-year degrees and charges well under the £9,000 limit, and there has been growth in the number of domestic students in recent years; there is a sense that this is a vocational, value-added degree going forward. I have watched the college develop further colleges overseas in places such as Kuala Lumpur and Dhaka in Bangladesh, and in a number of European centres. The fact that the college is often just regarded as an alternative provider fails to acknowledge its genuine contribution to the vital eco-system of higher education, where this Bill, perhaps belatedly, is doing important work. Elements of this Bill would have come into place some five years ago had it not been for some high-profile problems arising.

It is fair to say that there is an apparent sense of rude health in this sector, and we all have to recognise that this is a hugely important business and revenue generator for UK plc. That is partly because of the benefit of our having the English language, but to a large extent it is because we have highly recognised and highly approved
standards of quality. We perhaps take that for granted with our own education providers, be they in the HE or the FE sphere, but this is not necessarily the case in many other parts of the world. The Minister will know that we have some 125 publicly funded HE institutions, which have almost 2 million students. The sector employs 170,000 academic staff and has an income in excess of £25 billion per year.

The research side of what is being proposed in the Bill is crucial, as innovation is at the heart of what is done in many of our universities, although not all. It is right to recognise that some providers in this sphere will not go down the research route, recognising that they will be focusing largely on vocational education. It is also important that we bear in mind that it is not just spin-off companies from the Cambridge universities of this world that do well; a huge number of high-tech companies, in pharmaceuticals and in other areas, have tremendous successes.

I have been the MP in this district for the past 15 years. Right in the heart of London, we have a tremendous array of HE providers. We have the super Russell Group of the London School of Economics, King’s College London, Imperial and, just outside my constituency, University College London. They are globally successful universities, and in many ways the dominance in popular culture of Oxbridge is now being threatened, in a positive way, by the raising of standards by those four London universities, which are now global players in what they do.

I also have in my constituency one of the sites of the London Metropolitan University, which has been a troubled institution. I have worked with a number of MPs across the House to try to make the case for its continued existence in these troubled times. When I hear debates such as the one that took place earlier today on the idea of allowing universities to fail, I think that that is an important part of any economic eco-system. I do not deny that the implications of such a failure for employees and for students cannot be ignored, but I believe that that is a healthy state of affairs if universities are not doing the job and not providing the education that they ought to provide. If that education is not of appropriate quality or there is insufficient demand for it, universities should not be preserved just because they have existed as institutions for a long time.

I welcome the Bill. I shall focus my brief comments on part 1, which deals with the creation of the office for students. No one can deny that the regulatory system in this sector has evolved into a bafflingly complex framework of organisations and an alphabet spaghetti of acronyms. The overlap between the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Office for Fair Access and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education has rightly been identified. The new mechanism will get rid of that overlap.

I wholeheartedly support the recognition of the role of students as consumers. They are far more conscious of that role than they ever were in my time as an undergraduate in the mid-1980s, and that is a positive thing. One of the by-products of students paying for their education is that they want to get good value from it. They will be much more critical of poor or repetitive teaching. They will want to ensure broadly that the facilities, both academic and non-academic, within the institutions to which they are paying that money are of a high standard. When I see undergraduates in my constituency, I am struck by how focused they are on getting the best out of their education. One might say that that is consumerism; one might say it is a source of regret for those of us who were at university in bygone decades. I think it is a healthy state of affairs that students take such matters seriously. The Bill implicitly recognises that by setting up the office for students.

The Bill needs full scrutiny in Committee and in the other place, where there are plenty of experts in this field. There are concerns about the granting of provisional degrees, which were mentioned earlier by the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden). The proposals to relax the criteria for validating degree-awarding powers will need to be examined thoroughly. I have some sympathy with the view that because the title of a university is much respected, it should be clearly protected and defined. I hope that if we have a system that allows market failures, the Government will make provision for the interests that need to be protected. No university should be seen as too big or too old and established to fail. A range of regulatory relationships will need to be clarified, but the Bill establishes an important new architecture for the higher education system.

One aspect that will no doubt be debated here and in Committee is Government and ministerial interference in university courses. We need to ensure above all that those institutions retain as much academic and administrative freedom as possible. That is important going forward.

I take this opportunity to congratulate the Secretary of State on the ambitious proposals set out in the Bill. She has already shown herself willing to put excellence and elitism at the heart of the state school system, with her open-mindedness about the expansion of the grammar school sector. As a committed Conservative and former grammar school boy, it is tremendous for me to hear a Conservative Government putting social mobility at the heart of our educational philosophy.

I regard the promotion of competition, variety and consumer choice as long overdue, so I am delighted that this Secretary of State and her Minister for Universities and Science have indicated the intention to take on the vested interests in this field. There are few things as conservative as the left-leaning cadre of vice-chancellors. I wish the Bill Godspeed and look forward to hearing the rest of the debate on it this afternoon.

3.49 pm

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field). Whatever we disagree about, I very much respect the fact that he has in the past pointed out the damage done to the higher education system by ill-thought-out commitments and policies on immigration. I hear his note of caution about the regulation of new providers. I will say a bit more about that in a minute.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden) said in his excellent speech—others have mentioned this—the Bill comes at a time when universities and research institutes are reeling from the Brexit vote. The drafting of the Bill and the associated consultation clearly took place in the context of an expected remain result. The uncertainties about replacing EU research
funding and the position of EU students now confronting the sector would be good enough reasons, in themselves, for putting this legislation on hold to give this House and the Government the opportunity to ensure that the framework for higher education and research is fit for purpose in a post-Brexit world.

There are other concerns about the Bill. While I do not have a problem, in principle, with facilitating new providers and more choice in the sector, there are strong grounds, as the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster hinted, for proceeding more carefully than the Government propose, because it is likely that limited Government finance will be further stretched when funding per student is already under enormous pressure, and there is a risk that failure by new providers will be bad for students and damage the reputation of UK higher education more widely. Let us remember that UK universities and research are currently a huge national asset—an area of competitive strategic advantage that will be even more important, economically and culturally, as we strive to make a success of life outside the EU.

Further, specific, concerns have been drawn to my attention by Oxford University. Clause 23, which provides for the assessment of standards as well as quality, is an extension of regulatory power that infringes institutional autonomy. The Government need to tell us what its purpose is and how it will be used. Clause 43 empowers the office for students to revoke by Order the Acts of Parliament or royal charters that have established our universities. The ability to dismantle so much with so little by way of parliamentary scrutiny cannot be right, and much stronger scrutiny and protection is needed.

Liam Byrne: Is it not incumbent on the Minister to give a categorical assurance to the House that where rights and entitlements proscribed in royal charter are deleted, they will be reinstated by the Government?

Mr Smith: Yes, indeed. As I have said, there must be full scrutiny by this House. These are Acts of Parliament that are being overturned by an Order—it is absolutely extraordinary.

There are further worries on the structure of research funding. It took the Secretary of State an awfully long time to get on to research. While the Government’s stated intention is to keep the dual funding principle, all research funding is to be the responsibility of the proposed UK research and innovation body, and there is no explicit provision for ring-fenced funding for anything other than specific pieces of work. It is therefore not clear in practice how dual funding is to be delivered. The call in the Bill for a “balanced funding principle” to which the Secretary of State must have regard is vague. I put it to the Government that it is crucial to future UK research capacity that the Bill strengthen the commitment to dual support.

I am also concerned that the Bill does not mention the higher education innovation fund. The Bill artificially divides teaching and research, when in practice the two often go together, especially at the highest levels, including in the work of museums and the well-founded laboratory principle. There really needs to be proper recognition of that in the Bill.

Similarly, there is a huge omission in there not being any requirement for UK Research and Innovation to provide for postgraduate research education and training, which is crucial for graduates moving into the high-tech sector. That was previously regarded, and rightly so, as being so important that the research councils had it written into their royal charters, so why is it not in this Bill? It certainly should be.

I am also alarmed that under clause 84, research councils could be abolished or merged by order. That could affect whole areas of research, so surely it is sufficiently serious that Parliament should have proper oversight.

There is much that is wrong with this Bill, and it is spectacularly ill timed. The Government should take it away, consult and think again.

3.56 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. I welcome the Bill, particularly its focus on enabling students to make an informed choice about their university options. I have been concerned for some time that too many students regard an immediate, traditional campus-based undergraduate degree as their only option. In saying that, in no way do I wish to diminish the importance of such degrees. For many, that is absolutely the right option and there should be no restriction on numbers—if it is right for somebody, they should do it—but it should be a positive choice and not regarded as a default option.

I want students at school to be able to look at all the options open to them and choose what works best for them, whether that is a traditional degree, a degree apprenticeship, a part-time degree or even deferring their degree to a later point in their career. I welcome the proposals to establish new, high-quality providers to offer different products and increase the range of options for students.

We must also not forget to place the Bill’s provisions in the context of upskilling the workforce and lifelong learning. I am very proud to have in my constituency the Open University. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden), was a lecturer there for some time. In its nearly 50 years of existence—I am not saying that the hon. Gentleman was there from the outset—it has given opportunities to some 2 million people to upskill and reskill.

The excellent briefing note distributed by the Open University encapsulates the point that I want to make: “It is essential that these far-reaching proposals are not developed solely through the policy lens of an 18 year old student entering higher education for the first time. Re-skilling and upskilling the adult workforce are essential for future prosperity. Economic success in the coming years depends on embedding a lifelong learning culture which rests on 3 co-equal pillars: flexible lifelong learning opportunities, apprenticeships and full time study.”

I very much agree with that.

I welcome the measures that the Government have already taken to assist part-time students, including the decision to introduce maintenance loans in 2018-19, which will work alongside the tuition fee loans introduced in 2012-13. They have also changed the equal and lower qualification restriction that was imposed in 2008. That will allow new students to apply for tuition fee loans for
a second, part-time honours degree in engineering, technology and computer sciences this year, and for a wider range of part-time honours degrees in science, technology, engineering and maths in 2017-18. That will be very much welcomed by the Open University.

To reinforce the support for the part-time higher education sector, I want two suggestions to be considered in Committee. The first is an express commitment to part-time higher education and adult education in the proposed general duties of the office for students; and the second is confirmation that a broad range of different types of English higher education providers will be recognised in the make-up of the office for students board. I hope that those constructive amendments, which the Open University has suggested, will be considered favourably in Committee.

While I am on the topic of the OU, I have two other small asks from it that I would like to put on record. The first is a simple request for clarification. The Open University is the only UK-wide university that has a footprint in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as in England. Clause 75 defines the meaning of English higher education provider, and I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm that that definition will apply to the Open University as well as to other English-based universities. The second ask relates to the Open University’s status as a centre of research excellence. The Open University wishes to ensure that the new UKRI body, which is set out in the Bill, will not concentrate research into fewer institutions and geographical locations; and that early career researchers, women and minority groups will be offered opportunities and routes to support their research ambitions.

I turn to the opportunities for creating new high-quality higher education institutions. There is huge potential for new entrants into the market, and I agree with the comments of the principal of Pearson College, Roxanne Stockwell, who said:

“It is clear that the dominance of the one-size-fits-all model of university education is over... Students are calling out for pioneering education models and an increased focus on skills that will prepare them for the careers of the future.”

I will use Milton Keynes, which I represent, to illustrate that potential. Members may not be aware of this, but in January next year Milton Keynes turns 50. It has reached its planned size, in terms of both population and physical footprint. I apologise to the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Mr Smith), who heard me make these comments in Westminster Hall last week, but they merit a wider audience.

Mr Andrew Smith: The hon. Gentleman need not worry; his comments bear repetition.

Iain Stewart: I am grateful for that endorsement. Having reached its planned size, Milton Keynes is actively debating what comes next. There is a live debate about our future size and shape—what the Milton Keynes of 2050 should look like—and our place in the important Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor, which the former Chancellor announced in the Budget that the National Infrastructure Commission would explore for growth potential.

Milton Keynes has the Open University, as I have mentioned. Nearby, we have excellent universities such as Cranfield and Buckingham, and we have a healthy further education and higher education partnership in University Centre Milton Keynes. Despite those things, it has long been an aspiration for Milton Keynes to have a campus-based university of its own to help generate economic growth and provide all the other social and cultural benefits that university towns and cities enjoy, but I question whether the answer is a traditional campus-based university. Given the increasing consumer sophistication of students, should we not try to create something new that benefits the innovative tradition of Milton Keynes?

In that context, I was absolutely delighted that the recently established Milton Keynes Futures 2050 commission—chaired by Sir Peter Gregson, the vice chancellor of Cranfield—proposed as one of its central recommendations a Milton Keynes institute of technology, or MKIT. Its mission would be to promote research, teaching and practice that provide solutions to the challenges faced by fast-growing cities. It would offer portfolio learning, living lab research and partnerships with a wide range of global educational institutions and employers. MKIT could be the institution that fills the growing skills gap that we face in the new intelligent mobility market. We urgently need to train more people in skills in this sector.

I am also proud to have the Transport Systems Catapult in Milton Keynes. Working with Departments, it has published research showing that there will be a gap of hundreds of thousands of people with those skills in a market that will be worth £900 billion by 2025. If we want to have a share of that global market, we really need to focus skills in this area. That is just one example of the many opportunities that exist, and the Bill provides huge opportunities for innovation.

There is a critical link between the expansion of higher education and the prospects for local economies and people’s life challenges. I strongly believe that the Bill strengthens that link, and I very much look forward to supporting it tonight.

4.5 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I want to pick up where my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Mr Smith) left off. The truth is that much in the Bill is long overdue. Much of the proposed legislation is necessary, but the truth is that the Bill was written for a very different time and in a very different era. The risk is that the Minister is presenting to the House a halfway house that will leave us with the task of having to come back to some big strategic questions to finish the job.

The Secretary of State was absolutely right to underline the necessity of the Bill. We need the strength of our higher education institutions today like never before. In this post-referendum era, we will have to get a lot better at making things a lot more efficiently. The level of productivity growth that blights our economy today is actually worse than it was at the end of the 1970s, when we used to call it the British disease. The problem with the Bill, however, is that it does nothing to address the big strategic challenges that confront students, our science base and our skills system. I will touch quickly on each.

First, let me talk about students. We all know that there is still a big debate to be had about the financial viability of the student loan system. This afternoon is
not the occasion to rehearse the fragility of the Ponzi scheme that now underpins that system, but I often used to debate with the Minister’s predecessors whether Britain could look forward to a debt write-off of £70 billion or £80 billion. The basic message was pretty simple: the student loan system as currently set up is not fit for purpose, and it is certainly not fit for the future.

The Minister has proposed a number of measures to ensure a degree of transparency, not least freezing the thresholds for student loan repayments, but the truth is that we need a wholesale overhaul of the transparency of the system. We need the system to work well, but, quite frankly, too often we are looking through a glass darkly when we try to figure out what is going on.

Like many right hon. and hon. Members, I am disappointed that there is not enough in the Bill about lifelong learning, and I am very disappointed that there is nothing in it about workplace learning. I would like a bold revolution in the way we bring together Unionlearn, the Workers Education Association and the Open University, so that it is possible for workers to go from ABC to PhD in their workplace. In a world where someone can get a massive open online learning course beamed to their smartphone, that is surely possible, but we do not have the qualifications system we need to make that a reality, nor is policy in the right place.

The second big challenge we confront is on the science base. Quite frankly, although we are all grateful to Sir Paul Nurse for the heroic job he has done in overhauling the governance of the science base, there is nothing in the Bill to confront the big strategic challenge for science in this country, which is the fact that we are plummeting down the league tables when it comes to science spending. A few years ago, the Royal Society put it rather well, “unless we grow smarter, we will grow poorer”. If the global race is anything, it is a science race, and today we are falling behind. By 2019, China will be the world’s biggest science player. Right now, we are losing the race for the good high-tech jobs of tomorrow and the world’s biggest science player. Right now, we are losing the race for the good high-tech jobs of tomorrow. By 2019, China will become the world’s biggest science player. Right now, we are losing the race for the good high-tech jobs of tomorrow. By 2019, China will become the world’s biggest science player.

We know how to run those apprenticeship schemes but delivering the grand total of just 100 apprentices on level 5 in my home city of Birmingham. Today, just 2% of apprentices go on to level 5 study, and there has been a 40% fall in the numbers on HNCs, HNDs and foundation degrees. Those who are seeking a professional and technical path to higher education from the age of 14 up to the age of 21 go through a system that is overseen by Ofqual. Ofsted, the AQA, the Education Funding Agency, the Skills Funding Agency and now the office for students. It is, quite frankly, a dog’s breakfast.

We need a holistic review to put in place a single, comprehensive dual-track system for technical education. That means everyone from the age of 14 learning some kind of technical education; it means rebuilding the careers service; it means high-quality, gold-standard apprenticeships with everyone studying English and maths up to the age of 18; it means a new degree of specialisation in our colleges, with the creation of institutes of technical excellence; and it means an apprenticeship system that gives at least half of our young people the chance to take a technical apprenticeship up to level 5. We know how to run those apprenticeship schemes because great British companies such as Jaguar Land Rover and BAE Systems are doing so. The only problem is that they are harder to get into today than Oxford University.

Crucially, we need a new partnership between further education and higher education. We should be emulating the best practice in the United States, where it is possible to do the first couple of years of a degree at a further education college before moving on to finish it in a couple of years at a world-class higher education institution. That is why the duty to collaborate is so vital, and why it is such a problem that it is missing from the Bill.

We have been burying our scientists with our sovereigns since the death of Sir Isaac Newton. There is no other country on earth that would get BAFTAs for films about its great scientists. We are one of the world’s great science powers, but our position is in jeopardy. That is why we needed more than a halfway house from the Secretary of State this afternoon; we needed a Bill that positioned higher education as the powerhouse it needs to be for our country’s future.

The third challenge that I want to touch on briefly is the one that troubles me most: why is there nothing in the Bill to address the revolution that is needed in the technical education system in this country? We know how to design good dual-track technical education systems. How do we know that? Because we did it for Germany after the second world war. We just forgot to do it for ourselves. The noble Lord Percy reported to this House in 1944 that the position of Great Britain as a leading industrial nation is being endangered by a failure to secure the fullest possible application of science to industry...and...this failure is partly due to deficiencies in education.”

The problem is that what was true in 1944 is true today. We do not have a strong dual-track system that takes a student in a constituency like mine and leads them on to the very highest level of technical education. We have a rise in unqualified science teachers in our classrooms; a careers service that the CBI says is on “life support”; a further education system that was cut by 40% over the course of the last Parliament; and an apprenticeship system that is growing the number of level 2s, but delivering the grand total of just 100 apprentices on level 5 in my home city of Birmingham. Today, just 2% of apprentices go on to level 5 study, and there has been a 40% fall in the numbers on HNCs, HNDs and foundation degrees. Those who are seeking a professional and technical path to higher education from the age of 14 up to the age of 21 go through a system that is overseen by Ofqual. Ofsted, the AQA, the Education Funding Agency, the Skills Funding Agency and now the office for students. It is, quite frankly, a dog’s breakfast.

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4.13 pm

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. I welcome the Secretary of State to her role. I am also
very pleased that the Minister is taking the Bill through the House, as he spent many months working on the Green Paper and, more recently, the White Paper.

I welcome the news that further and higher education will be pulled in to the Department for Education. I note the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) about the Education Committee’s workload increasing significantly, but perhaps my workload will reduce somewhat because the Sub-Committee on Education, Skills and the Economy might be somewhat short-lived.

We have an outstanding higher education system. We have world-leading universities—we are home to four of the world’s top 10 universities—and are second only to the US. However, we must not be complacent, which is why I welcome the Bill. The research excellence framework is a well established and recognised way of assessing and incentivising high quality research. However, the higher education sector has been too heavily geared to prioritising academic research. The Bill looks to achieve a much better balance, emphasising those things that matter to students, their parents and employers.

We need to ensure that students get value for money. We need to ensure that, at the end of their degree, they feel that they have gained from their university experience and, critically, that they can progress on to graduate jobs or further study. We need to ensure that we do not hear students saying, “Was university really worth it?”

To take a few facts, worryingly, the HEIFESS—higher education in further education students survey—showed that more than a third of students said that they would have made a different decision if they had known then what they know now. Similarly a Higher Education Statistics Agency survey showed that around 20% of employed graduates are in non-professional roles three and a half years after graduating.

Students need better information about universities and the courses they are looking at, and support to get into graduate roles. I therefore welcome the creation of the office for students, as set out in part 1 of the Bill, which will be the main regulatory body for higher education in England. The duties of the office for students will be to promote quality, greater choice and opportunities for students. Specifically, it will operate the teaching excellence framework, which we have heard a lot about this afternoon. There should be no surprise about the TEF because it was a key Conservative manifesto commitment.

The TEF will put in place incentives designed to drive up the standard of teaching in all universities and provide students with greater clarity about where teaching is best and about the benefits they can expect to gain from their course. In turn, that will create more competition within the sector and continue to drive up the standard of teaching. It will focus on helping students progress into employment or further study.

The Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, of which I am a member, along with the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who is in his place, conducted an inquiry into the new TEF. As a Committee, we welcomed and endorsed the Government’s focus on teaching quality, agreeing that a stronger incentive to focus on teaching quality via the TEF will help to ensure that higher education institutions meet student expectations and improve on their leading international position.

Although the rationale for the TEF was generally accepted by the sector, questions and concerns were raised about the potential metrics how it will affect institutions and how it will apply. Specifically, concerns were raised about the link between the proposed metrics—employability, retention and satisfaction—and teaching quality, and the potential unintended consequences of institutions seeking to optimise their scores on each metric.

Learning gain was suggested as an alternative—other countries are exploring it—but work needs to be done to establish an effective way to measure it. I understand that the Higher Education Funding Council for England is undertaking pilot studies on learning gain or added value metrics that might work, but they could take two or three years to develop. The Committee therefore called on all parties to prioritise the speedy establishment of viable metrics relating to learning and gain.

The technical consultation was therefore welcome and an opportunity for the sector to engage further with the development of the TEF, including ways in which it believed graduate employment could be measured. The development of additional metrics is key to ensuring that it can be incorporated in the TEF by year three, 2018-19, as set out in the White Paper published in May. As I understand it, the technical consultation closed in July. Will the Minister, when he comes to wind up, update the House on progress in developing additional metrics: those being considered and pilots currently being undertaken? The need to pilot the TEF, the metrics and the development of additional measures means it was welcome news in the White Paper that the speed at which the TEF would be implemented, specifically the link with fees, would be slowed down.

Turning to the link between the TEF and fees, we need to ensure that the higher education sector is on a financially sustainable footing. With record numbers of students securing a place at university, we have seen that tuition fees did not stop young people accessing university. With the student loan system, we have a mechanism by which students do not need to meet the costs of university up front. Labour created a provision in law to maintain tuition fees in line with inflation every year. The tuition cap of £9,000, set in 2012, is now worth only £8,500 in real terms and is expected to erode further, potentially to £8,000 by the end of the Parliament.

To date, there has been no accountability when it comes to institutions increasing their fees in line with inflation. With the real value of tuition fees declining and concerns in the sector about maintaining levels of investment, we need to find ways to provide universities with the scope to increase their fees in a way that is fair and accountable. The TEF has a role to play, although all parties need to work together on design and the metrics to make it work in practice. As I have said, I am pleased that the White Paper confirmed that 2017-18 will be used as a trial year. I am sure the higher education sector will have welcomed the opportunity to input further into the technical consultation.

I was pleased to read an article by Steve Smith, vice-chancellor of the University of Exeter, in the Times Higher Education. Despite concerns about some of the detail, he stated:
But in my view, it is essential that we proceed with the teaching excellence framework (TEF) linked to tuition fee increases, a policy that offers significant benefits for the quality of higher education that are important to both students and universities. This is why Universities UK board unanimously supported the link between an effective TEF and fee rises.

He went on to say:

"The government rightly wants 'something for something', for the economy and for students. For the economy, the TEF offers a way to support the continued improvement in the contribution of higher education to the knowledge economy through the creation of graduates with the skills needed by industry and business. For students, the 'something' is a funding mechanism that allows institutions to invest in teaching and the student experience and thereby to preserve and enhance the quality of education in our universities."

Finally, I want to turn to the idea of new universities entering the market. Our economy needs more graduates. Over half of the job vacancies between now and 2022 are expected to be in occupations that employ graduates. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State mentioned in her speech, lifting the cap on student numbers means more university places being made available.

Mr Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Has my hon. Friend made any study of the outrageous discrimination suffered by English students studying at Scottish universities after we come out of the European Union?

Amanda Milling: My right hon. Friend makes an interesting point, on which I am sure there will be further discussions.

It is excellent news that record numbers of students are securing a university place. What is more, the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds going into higher education is up too. UCAS data show that young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are applying at a record rate in the 2016-17 academic year. This is excellent progress. But with more demand for graduates and more skills required in the workplace, the sector cannot stand still, which is why I welcome the provisions in part 1 of the Bill making it easier for new high-quality universities to enter the market. This will mean that more places can be created and that students will have more choice, as well as encouraging greater diversity and innovation in the sector.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend therefore welcome the news that record numbers of students are securing a university place. What is more, the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds going into higher education is up too. UCAS data show that young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are applying at a record rate in the 2016-17 academic year. This is excellent progress. But with more demand for graduates and more skills required in the workplace, the sector cannot stand still, which is why I welcome the provisions in part 1 of the Bill making it easier for new high-quality universities to enter the market. This will mean that more places can be created and that students will have more choice, as well as encouraging greater diversity and innovation in the sector.

Amanda Milling: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for his point. He is absolutely right. In fact, he must have been reading over my shoulder, because I was just about to talk about Staffordshire University. I currently do not have a university in Cannock Chase, but we have businesses and organisations with close links to Staffordshire University, and I have a lot of constituents who go there. As a consequence of the Bill and opening up the market to new entrants, perhaps one day I will have a new university in my constituency.

In conclusion, we have a world-class higher education sector, but we cannot be complacent. Our economy needs high-quality graduates and our graduates need the skills to contribute to our economy. I welcome the Bill. It demonstrates that the Government have a clear plan for higher education and builds on the progress already made.

4.26 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The Bill comes before us at a time of great change, the most important of those changes being my birthday today. It was not that long ago that I was sitting in the Minister’s place. In those days, I looked more like Denzel Washington; today, I look like Forest Whitaker.

Last week’s reshuffle saw the universities brief move to the Department for Education and a new Education Secretary appointed together with a new Business Secretary. I served as universities and skills Minister in the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, and then in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, when universities switched from Education to Business. It became clear to me that this move gave higher education and the sector as a whole a much more prominent voice in Government. Placing universities under the umbrella of Business, Innovation and Skills drew a clear and explicit link between higher education and productivity, social mobility and ensuring that we have the skilled workforce needed to power our economy. Universities, the research they undertake and the education they provide were seen by No. 10, the Treasury and Cabinet Ministers from across Government as absolutely central to what the Government were trying to achieve.

It is inevitable that the move will mean reduced influence in Whitehall. When DIUS and then BIS were created, there was much debate and some concern among vice-chancellors, but the near universal view was that it would be beneficial. I am concerned, therefore, about this change. It has not been commented on so far but it is the backdrop to the Bill. I ask the Minister: what will happen if our universities are no longer seen as integral to driving innovation and boosting productivity? What will happen when the spending review comes around and universities fight with schools for resources, as they historically did, and lose out, as they historically did?

What will happen when there is pressure to further tighten visa rules for students in order to meet migration targets? BIS worked hard to beat off the Home Office. I was one of those Ministers. The Minister will not admit it, but it is a regular part of the job. My God, how much harder it will be with universities placed in the Department for Education! In each case, the voice of universities will, frankly, carry less weight as a consequence.

Mr Swire: The right hon. Gentleman will have heard what my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) said, citing Sir Steve Smith, the vice-chancellor of Exeter University. He will also be aware of the huge number of overseas students at Exeter University, which make it one of the leading universities in the country, if not in the world. I know that the Minister shares my view about visas, but does he not recognise that in this period of uncertainty—not just because of Brexit, but because of visa restrictions—many universities are living in a state of fear? They are worried about European funding for various projects, as well as uncertainty about the visa regime.
Mr Lammy: That was, in a sense, the point I was making. Some of the tensions in Whitehall, particularly those emanating from the Home Office vis-à-vis whoever is in government and where they are placed, lie behind this problem.

There is, however, another problem that has been mentioned by Members, not least by my right hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and for Oxford East (Mr Smith)—namely that the vote to leave the European Union has made the future very uncertain indeed for higher education institutions. In looking at this Bill, surely the Government must acknowledge the need to provide greater certainty and not further instability at this time. The higher education sector will be particularly adversely affected by the UK’s decision to leave the European Union. Brexit will significantly diminish research funding across our universities unless the Government propose a large-scale programme for research funding across all disciplines to fill the gap. It would be interesting to hear from the Minister about that.

We know, of course, that the leave campaign’s claim to be saving £350 million a week was entirely fictitious, but I note that the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) promised that any lost EU subsidies paid to farmers would be replaced by central Government funding, so I am sure the House would welcome a similar promise today that any lost research funding will be replaced. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about that.

Universities face the prospect of losing out across the board, so how will they fare in this post-Brexit world when the calls to curb immigration inevitably come? Universities have been warning for years that making student visas harder to come by was having a hugely damaging effect, as indeed the right hon. Member for East Devon (Mr Swire) just said. Sir Keith Burnett, vice-chancellor of the University of Sheffield, estimates that 40% of his university’s income from teaching comes from international students, and non-UK students also generate £11 billion for the wider UK economy. Almost 100,000 students had their visas cut short between 2013 and 2015, and between 2010 and 2015 the number of overseas students arriving in the UK fell by 25%.

The issue is not just about money, however. What message does Brexit send out? The world-leading reputation of our higher education sector is contingent on a perception internationally—and it is this reputation that is at risk. Surely in this context, the Government must take a step backwards when it comes to improving access to our universities. Earlier this year, the last Prime Minister announced plans to force universities to disclose applicant data so that we could see how they were doing in this regard. The Government aim to double the proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds who enter our universities, and also to increase the number of students from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds by 20%.

At this time of flux, the House will need assurances that that agenda will be taken very seriously and will be driven from the centre, especially given that, in March, the Social Market Foundation’s report “Widening Participation” warned that both those targets would be missed on current trends. Les Ebdon, the director of Fair Access to Higher Education, has given the same warning, pointing out that only 21% of universities have met, or are on course to meet, all their access targets.

The figures are striking. Between 2005 and 2015, the proportion of the intake of Russell Group universities who were from poor backgrounds rose from 19.5% to just 20.8%. That is 1% in a decade, and it is not even close to being acceptable. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, the percentage of deprived pupils admitted by seven of the 24 Russell Group universities—including Oxford, Cambridge and Durham—has fallen in the last decade. According to the Sutton Trust, only 4% of students at our top 10 universities are from the most disadvantaged areas, an increase of 0.6% compared to 2009. Just 3.6% of Cambridge students and 2.4% of Oxford students are from the 20% of areas with the lowest higher education participation levels.

I know that the new Prime Minister is making her mark by ensuring there is not over-representation of people from independent schools on the Front Bench, but I think I should put on record why that is so important. Independent school pupils are nearly three times more likely to be accepted into a Russell Group university than pupils from non-independent schools. In 2010, 16.6% of pupils from independent schools went to Oxbridge universities, compared to just 4% of all students. In the same year, independent school pupils were over-represented in Russell Group universities: 40% of Oxbridge places were awarded to independent school pupils, but only 12% of Russell Group universities’ intake was from independent schools.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the removal of caps on university places brought about a dramatic transformation, enabling people from disadvantaged backgrounds to apply to universities and to gain places? If the number of places is limited, that limits life chances from the start.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the removal of caps on university places brought about a dramatic transformation, enabling people from disadvantaged backgrounds to apply to universities and to gain places? If the number of places is limited, that limits life chances from the start.
Mr Lammy: I do not accept that, I am afraid. The removal of the cap does not help when it comes to fair access. All that it does is help more chinless wonders from more public schools to get in.

Given that 100 elite schools account for 3% of the total of 31.9% of admissions to Oxbridge, the same proportion as in 2008, we have seen absolutely no progress in the opening up of Oxbridge entrance. St Pauls Girls’ School and Westminster lead the way—nearly half their students go to Oxbridge—while more than 1,300 schools do not have a single Oxbridge entrant, and only 50 students receiving free school meals were admitted to Oxbridge in 2013.

I acknowledge that progress has been made in widening access to universities for our most disadvantaged students and that more poor children are going to university, but the crucial question is: which university? I know that the Secretary of State is new, but she did not really get to the heart of that. It is not just about the widening of participation, but about fair access so that people can get their straight As and A*s and they too can make their way from Sunderland, from Darlington and from Tottenham to these universities.

Rebecca Pow: The right hon. Gentleman is making an extremely valuable case, but does this not highlight why we need this Bill and some of the things in it, in particular the focus on transparency, so that we can look at social mobility in the individual institutions and work out where they are going wrong and where they need to do more? That is precisely what this Bill is for.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I might be able to help a little, as the hon. Lady is hoping to catch my eye next. Mr Lammy, your speech has taken about 14 minutes so far, and I did advise Members to take about 12 minutes. I am sure your contribution will be coming to an end very shortly.

Mr Lammy: Transparency will of course help, but we know what works and under the Labour Government most of that was covered by the Aimhigher programme which, sadly, was abolished by this Government.

Do we want our universities to be engines of social mobility or do we accept that the universities will merely reinforce and embed the inequality of opportunity that pervades our society? That is the central question and that is the test against which this Bill should be held. Of course, we welcome some of the changes that will establish a new improved body for what was the Office for Fair Access, but the points made so far in this debate about teaching are particularly well made. To link teaching to the labour market when universities’ purview is not entirely about the labour market is worrying, and to preference funding alongside that teaching is, I think, suspect. I certainly want to hear the Minister say more about that and I hope that issue receives more scrutiny in Committee.

The question is: is this Bill the right one now given the Brexit challenge? Is it really going to make a change beyond that on transparency about fair access? I hope the Minister will come back to that point. And is it right, on the teaching question alone, to put all the burdens on universities in relation to the labour market, and certainly to allow them to charge more for teaching when that ought to be at the heart of what a university does anyway?

4.42 pm

Rebecca Pow: I am very pleased to see the Minister for Universities and Science, my hon. Friend Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson) back on the Front Bench, and I want to put on record that I welcome the Secretary of State to her position. I share her experience of being the first person in my family to go to university. Both my parents left school at 16 and came from a lowly farming background and I can honestly say it is, and was, a ticket to the world. In those days, very few women went to university, so I can assure the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) that things have definitely improved.

I rise to support this Higher Education and Research Bill with that as my background, and also with having two children who have already gone through university and one son who, in fairness, is deciding whether to go at all and is thinking about what it will provide. I realise how important it is to do to go to university, to consider which subject to study and what job might be available at the end of it. Those things are very important.

I have discussed this with many students in my constituency, both at the local sixth-form college, Richard Huish, which is exceedingly good and is in the top 10 in the country, and at Somerset college. I talk to young people about what is preventing them from going further, why they do not want to go—whether they would rather stay at home and so forth. I am very hopeful that lots of these things will be addressed in the Bill because higher education is undoubtedly good for the individual.

Graduates on average earn in excess of £100,000 more over their lifetime, having got that graduate premium. It is not just good for the individual, it is also good for the economy, and in this very rapidly changing world it is essential that here in the UK, especially in our post-Brexit era, we can move our workforce forward. That is why this Bill is going to be so important.

Around 20% of UK economic growth between 1982 and 2005 was a result of increased numbers of graduates, and the skills they brought to the table. Therefore I welcome the Bill, and one of its key aims is to encourage and enable even more people to have such opportunities. The Government have been attacked by the Opposition, but the record is already much improved from the days of Labour, with the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who go into higher education up from around 13% in 2009 to almost 19% now. The situation is improving, and young people from the most disadvantaged areas of England are now 36% more likely to enter higher education than they were in 2009. That is a record of gradual improvement, but more needs to be done, and the Bill will address that.

The Bill will support the establishment of new universities and promote choice and competition, making it easier for high quality, new providers and challenger institutions to enter the sector and award degrees, giving students more choice and boosting competition to improve teaching quality. Why is that necessary? We have heard lots of points this afternoon, but basically we need to address and improve the skills gap, and ensure a flow of young people and mature students who go on to further education and into business. We must ensure the right courses for those people.

I have spoken to many businesses in my constituency and held roundtable meetings, and it is clear that the right young people are not coming through to work in
those businesses. Taunton Fabrications makes bridges, stairwells and stairways for railways all over the country, but it cannot find the right people to work in its business and it is keen for us to get some better courses going. Fox Brothers, which has recently been taken over by Deborah Meaden, is a high-quality, high-end weaving company that provides Yves Saint Laurent and other top-end French companies with fabrics. It cannot find the right calibre of people with engineering experience, or the right textile experience to work in that company, and the Bill will help with that.

If we can address those gaps, we will help productivity in Taunton Deane and the wider south-west. For new universities, however, we are in a cold spot—not weatherwise today—because we do not have a university in the area. Much research has been done to prove that we could do with one, and planning is in progress. Nearby Bridgwater College has just joined with Somerset College, and that is where we hope to have a university. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) spoke about thinking outside the box and focusing new universities on the specialisms, strengths, and skills needed—particularly those already in the area—and that is exactly what we are doing in Taunton Deane.

The idea is to link up with health and nursing education—I know my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) is present, but Somerset’s main hospital is in Taunton Deane. It already runs courses with the local college, but we must build and focus on them more, and a university would help with that. We also have local specialisms in energy skills, and low-carbon energy and related engineering. That links into Hinkley Point, which we are all very confident we will pull off. That is spawning a plethora of other industries, but we need students and graduates to train in those areas, and to go out in the wider country to use their knowledge. We also have links with the Ministry of Defence which provides training, and with Rolls-Royce in Filton. There are lots of opportunities should we get that university off the ground. I am confident that we will, and that the Bill will help, just as it will in many other places. That would then benefit the wider economy. Productivity in the south-west is below the national level, which is a serious issue. One reason for that is that we do not have the right high-calibre skills and we do not retain our young people. They all go off to university somewhere else, so we need a university right where we are in order to fill the jobs there.

Jo Churchill: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a tendency for young people to go away to university and then to stay close to where they have been studying? At the moment, that is preventing Taunton Deane from benefiting from its students’ skills.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for making such a good point. Indeed, I feared that, when my own children went up north to get the northern experience from their universities, they might stay there and not come home, lovely as they are. It was a great experience and opportunity for them—one went to Leeds and one went to York—but I wanted them to come home. Not that they have yet—they have gone to various other places.

All these things are tied together. This is not just about upping the education offer; we also need to have the right infrastructure. For example, we have to have my A358 road upgrade and we must have good railway stations. All those things need to build together, and I am really confident that the Government get that. That is what they are doing, and our new Prime Minister really does understand that if we are going to increase our productivity, all those things have to link together.

I now want to move on to the part of the Bill that deals with establishing the office for students. It will be the new regulator for higher education, and it will have a duty to promote competition. I welcome this cultural shift in making it a statutory duty to take account of students’ interests. It is amazing that we have not done that before, given that they are the ones who are affected by all this, and I am delighted to welcome this big shift. I have had discussions with the National Union of Students and I understand that, on the whole, this is a very popular move.

We have heard much about the teaching excellence framework, which I welcome. It will ensure that universities focus on graduate employability. That links exactly to what I have been saying about jobs and skills in Taunton Deane; it all links together. Also, a number of hon. Members and hon. Friends have mentioned the need for an emphasis on the quality of teaching rather than just the quantity. We have only to talk to our own children, and other students, about their experiences at university to discover that, given the amount of money involved, some of the courses are sadly lacking in input hours. It is also sometimes unclear what that input actually means—various people are laughing and trying not to laugh—and what it will deliver in terms of employability. I absolutely welcome that part of the Bill.

The Bill also mentions the student protection plan. The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) talked about what would happen to students if their provider was unable to deliver their course, and the Bill will deal with that. I really am optimistic that, as a result of this new framework, students will be at the heart of the matter. I have already mentioned transparency, which will be key to enabling the social mobility that we all want to see. We all want everyone to have opportunities. We do not want an “us and them” situation; we want everybody to benefit. That is what this is all about. The ability to look at which colleges and universities are offering which courses, and at who is successful and getting a job, will put the onus on the establishments to be the best that they can. Otherwise, people will not want to go to them. I fully support that part of the Bill.

I really welcome the combining of research and innovation funding into a single strategic body—UK Research and Innovation. Research is an important part of this country’s economy and it is absolutely crucial to have a strategic approach to the way we handle it and the £6 billion currently invested in it. We should never underestimate the value of research in this country. We are world leaders in many areas, especially in environmental research, and we must build on that and offer greater opportunities.

The Bill strikes a truly healthy balance between protecting our universities’ global reputation for quality and encouraging more establishments, offering new and
innovative opportunities for so many more people from every single background. The Bill is essential and will benefit not only individuals, but the entire economy.

4.54 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is obviously a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), although I would caution her against letting “Game of Thrones” influence her understanding of the wonders of the north.

Aristotle once argued: “The roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet.”

Unfortunately, the Bill leaves a sour taste in the mouth, and I want to try to explain why using three particular issues. The first is access and my particular concerns about the provisions regarding sharia-compliant loans. The second is cost and the vexed question of social mobility. The third is about voice and how the Bill will ensure that students are equal partners in shaping the future of the courses that cost them so much to take.

Many colleagues have already set out our grave concerns about the context in which this legislation comes forward, in particular the challenges facing our higher education sector following this country’s decision to vote for Brexit. The sector has already been battered by this Government and now it will be buffeted by Brexit. Whether we voted to remain or to leave, we all recognise the responsibility to ensure planning for what comes next, but it is unclear what Brexit means for our HE sector and just how it will hit funding. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), sadly no longer in his place, put it well: how will EU students respond? Will we see a rush of English students to Scottish universities? Will EU students get loans?

Furthermore, what will happen to science funding? While sitting here today, I have sadly missed a session of the Science and Technology Committee. We recently went on a wonderful visit to Manchester to look at the National Graphene Institute. Investment in our higher education institutions through European partnerships is absolutely paramount, so to bring forward legislation at such an uncertain time for our HE sector is a source of real concern for Opposition Members.

Returning to the three issues I want to discuss in the short time available today, I will start with sharia-compliant loans. Do we need specific legislation or can we right this wrong straight away? The 2012 legislation raised real concerns within Britain’s Muslim community because of the introduction of £9,000 fees and the ability to bear interest on student loans. Before then, many families in my community were able to subsidise their children to go to university without a loan, but £9,000 a year fees put that goal beyond the reach of so many. The Bill is supposed to aid social mobility, so it is worth looking at what sharia means. Sharia-compliant loans are about the interest rate, and many Members will know I have a particular concern about what interest rates do to people’s behaviour. Under sharia, money has no intrinsic value—it is a medium of exchange. People who abide by sharia believe that it is forbidden to make a profit by exchanging cash. Sharia products respect that principle, enabling Muslims to access finance by sharing the risks and rewards equally based on the principles of Islam.

Like many parts of any religious code, sharia is open to interpretation and challenge, but there is something basically good about being able to respect such issues. I have already talked about it on Twitter today and the response reflected the difficulty that we face in society. I have been called a jihadi for wanting the introduction of sharia-compliant loans, but I suspect that that was by somebody who does not quite understand religion or, indeed, decency.

I have been pushing the Government on this matter for many years because I have seen in my community the impact on many students of our not being able to make such a small change to how a product is delivered. These students have bright young futures and could contribute great talents to our communities and our country but, because we do not respect their religious wishes, they have not been able to go on to higher education. Let me be clear: introducing sharia-compliant loans is not an endorsement of sharia itself. Just as we can challenge the bible’s teachings on homophobia while recognising and learning respect from the Christian community, we do not have to dismiss sharia principles entirely. For me, as a Co-op MP, the questions of mutualism at the heart of sharia finance are particularly apposite. I also recognise the practicalities, as being able to be accommodating in this way could make a big difference to many.

The crucial question for me is: why is this taking so long? I have been petitioning the Government since 2011 about the introduction of sharia-compliant loans. Although it is welcome that the Government have now accepted that it is right to do this, my concern is about whether we need to wait for this legislation, with all the problems that it will bring to the HE sector, to introduce these regulations. The Government already have the power to introduce loans and to change their terms, but tying the fate of these students to waiting for this Bill and refusing to publish a timetable for when this kind of product would be available is holding too many students back. Why this is taking so long raises a question in terms of the Government’s responsibilities under the public sector equality duty. We are asking not for preferential treatment for these students, but for equal treatment. We are asking for equal access and the reasonable amendments it would take to how this product is provided to secure that. I would like the Government and the Minister to clarify why they feel they cannot do this today, so that students who are studying now and wish to go to university—at the very least in 2017—could have confidence that they could do that. The Government sometimes rely on the small print in the student loan terms and conditions, which state: “The regulations may change from time to time and this means the terms of your loan may also change.”

That is allowing them to change other parts of our student loan system, yet they seem resistant to doing this to help Muslim students access our HE system at all. I ask the Government to set the timetable and give our students that chance.

The second issue I wish to raise is the wider one about cost and the concerns that many of us have about this Bill opening us up to higher costs in higher education. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), who, sadly, is also not in his place, is right to say that productivity and getting our young people into FE and HE is crucial to addressing
the biggest challenge our country faces. I am sorry that my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham is no longer here, because he was absolutely right in his passionate remarks about transparency. Transparency means little without action; it is a bit like telling somebody that they are tied to the train tracks and what time the train is coming. If we really want to open up access to university across our society—to be truly committed to social mobility—we have to go much further. The question for me is whether this Bill takes us further or could take us back.

We know that loans and more debt at a time of economic uncertainty are a luxury few in our society can afford. The biggest division in our society today is between those who are able to turn to the bank of mum and dad, and those who are not; university education and the possibility of higher fees is simply a bigger part of that picture of whether we may end up crushing talent, rather than developing it, if we do not act. Nothing in this Bill will change that. Nothing that this Government are doing will change that problem of all 18-year-olds being held back by not having the bank of mum and dad—I refer not just to those who want to go to university, but to those who have fantastic business ideas and those who want to go into FE. A truly socially mobile country would seek to work for 100% of 18-year-olds, not just 50% of them. It would recognise that the debt they might incur might affect not only their choice of whether to go to university, but their ability to get on the housing ladder and the ability for their families to look to the future. I say that as someone who represents too many families who have £10,000 to £15,000-worth of unsecured debt hanging over their heads as it is. If the Bill does not address that issue—and indeed, if some of its changes are making it even more likely that these people will incur higher debts—we will lose that talent, to the detriment of us all.

The Bill has to be seen in that context of what this Government are doing truly to open up opportunity. We must hold them to account for their failure to recognise the mistake they made when they got rid of child trust funds; the child ISAs will simply not replace the opportunity that those were providing. Tying university fees to the university rather than to the ability to pay is a retrograde step, in a way that a graduate tax would not be. This is taking place in a country where a rising economic uncertainty are a luxury few in our society can afford. We now have consumer rights because they pay tuition fees—a right to a reasonable service at a reasonable time in a reasonable place. Many law students will probably have a field day with those provisions, once they work out that those do apply to the quality of the course provided to them. The Bill does not take account of those provisions or of the value of student voice—the value of students as active consumers, acting to drive up standards.

The National Union of Students has called for student representation on the office for students board. I believe that the Bill must go much further and integrate the rights of students. Indeed, we need a Bill of Rights for students, who are being asked to pay thousands of pounds on the basis that their courses are good enough to get them into a high-paid job afterwards. Those are claims that any trading standards board could look at, but which we have no way of resolving within our current education system.

In conclusion, we know that all legislation coming before the House must pass the stress test of Brexit and what it means—the uncertainties and risks that we must now all tackle, whether we supported the leave or the remain campaign. We know that the Bill falls at that hurdle. We know, too, that it falls on those three powerful metrics—access to further and higher education, the cost of further and higher education, and the voice within further and higher education. I urge the Government to think again, press the pause button and work with the sector and with businesses and the finance sector to make sure that the Bill is not the retrograde step that it may inadvertently become.

Opposition Members are right—there are many potentially good things about the Bill, but there is at present too much that could take us backwards. The talent that lies in all our communities needs and deserves nothing less. Many students are now graduating, but they would look at this Bill and say, “It’s time for a re-set,” and that is what the Government must offer us today.

5.7 pm

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy).

I welcome the Minister to his continued role in seeing the Bill through. I agree with many of the points that Opposition Members have made about the huge challenge posed by our exit from Europe. Not one of the university vice-chancellors did not support staying in, and many of them have articulated their worries about funding and so on and about students, their safety and stability in choosing a course in this country, and their life beyond 2017. I agree with those points, but the present situation offers us opportunity as well as challenge. If we say that life must go on hold because of the decision taken two weeks ago, we will not get anywhere. Let us look at the opportunity and drive forward from there.

I welcome the Bill. We lead the world in higher education. Our papers are cited more widely than any other country’s in most leading areas of education.

The final point that the Bill has to address, which has not been discussed so far, is student voice. The Bill does not tie up with the provisions of the Consumer Rights Act 2015 that were extended to students, so that students now have consumer rights because they pay tuition fees—a right to a reasonable service at a reasonable time in a reasonable place. Many law students will probably have a field day with those provisions, once they work out that those do apply to the quality of the course provided to them. The Bill does not take account of those provisions or of the value of student voice—the value of students as active consumers, acting to drive up standards.
We may be a small country, yet in the quality and quantity of what our minds produce, we are one of the greatest countries. I had the pleasure last week of seeing another of my daughters graduate. The vice-chancellor said that he had dealings with 183 other countries and the institutions there. Bearing in mind that there are 195 countries across the world, it is clear that our collaboration extends beyond Europe. It is global, and we must seize that opportunity as we move forward.

We have heard the good things about the office for students and the teaching excellence framework, and I will not go over the statistics. We need to ensure quality of delivery and of reputation, because it is only by ensuring the continuing reputation of our universities that we will be able to export and bank what we have to offer in the higher education sector. We also need to ensure that their environment is kept stable, for which we need consistency. That is another reason I do not want to see things put on hold. Planning is vital in what are billion-pound industries, looking at the total combined unit of our universities, further education establishments, upper-tier schools, and businesses. I would like to hear how the Bill will help institutions that look to take the opportunity to export, much like Nottingham University having campuses in Malaysia. How can we work on this and challenge ourselves to think of new and innovative ideas? My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) spoke about the UK equivalent of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—he called it MKIT—with Cranfield University leading on delivering on different platforms. Such ideas need to be nurtured and propelled under this Bill.

Great teaching must ensure value for money—it should not be the negative that the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) said it is. The teaching excellence framework can ensure value for money for students. We talk too much of a homogenous education system. It is the fact that we have variety that gives us choice. That means that institutions can deliver expensive, science-driven degrees alongside some of the less expensive humanities degrees: the mix is important. Some degrees are more expensive than others to administer, and some need a lot of skills. If we give small institutions the right to deliver degrees, now that we have taken away the critical mass of 1,000, we must be careful about the quality of their delivery to ensure that what they are articulating they are delivering is truly what is on the piece of paper. I would like to see certainty in the metrics, as many others have said. It would be a good idea to pilot this in ‘17, ‘18 and so on, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) suggested.

Research is exceedingly important. Last week, the vice-chancellor of Lancaster University stated that it would be not only still a European university but an international university. He spoke about how it led on research across the world and was in the top 10 in this country. There is a science race. I have spoken about this in Westminster Hall and the Minister has responded. We do not spend quite enough in that area, and we need to look to punching better than we are. Near to my constituency, we have a huge catalyst of life sciences in Cambridge, at Cambridge University, which draws in £1.6 billion of income—the largest in the country. We need to work on such centres of excellence.

Carol Monaghan: Does the hon. Lady agree that some of the funding for the excellent research that is taking place is coming from the European Union, and we need to be pressing the Government to replace that funding so that that research can continue?

Jo Churchill: I agree that some of it is coming from the European Union. I am not sure whether the Government need to, or will be able to, dip into their pocket to assure that. They must look at possibly more exciting ways of loaning between business and universities, and stimulating particular areas and sectors in order that they contribute to driving the skills base forward. As my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) said, we have many high-powered industries in this country—nuclear, pharmaceuticals, and so on—that are more than adept at this. Indeed, I have spoken to the Minister about our telecoms industry, which is more than adept at putting some of its own money into ensuring that skills come through. While I would agree that there needs to be some certainty, I would not necessarily say that it should come purely from Government.

Innovations in life sciences, pharmaceuticals and the 100,000 Genomes Project show that a strong university sector is key to both the health and the wealth of our nation. Organisations have a large part to play. Businesses want skills, but in order to build them up they must communicate more with the higher and further education sectors. They are playing an increasingly important part in our university institutions.

Last year, one of my daughters graduated across the river, and this week another graduated in Lancaster, which I consider to be truly northern. Another of my daughters is in Newcastle, and another is waiting to go. [Interruption.] I could go on for ages. I have a vast amount of experience visiting university campuses across the UK, although not so much those in Scotland. I am constantly amazed by, for example, Heston Blumenthal’s interaction with the University of Reading and Tata’s interaction with the University of Warwick, which underpin the importance of the relationship between business and universities. Such relationships are already in place and the Bill builds on them, makes them more transparent and develops the connection between further and higher education and business. Our focus on teaching and research allows us to provide opportunities for businesses with specific needs. In his review, Sir Paul Nurse asked for coherence, and I want the Minister to drive that into the Bill.

We have a chance to export education and improve research collaborations. We need to ensure that marketisation is monitored and that there is no oversupply. Although competition is good, oversupply can lead to the problems that have been mentioned. If there is too much freedom in a market, deliverers will always pick the easy route, so there must be an assurance that the low-hanging fruit will not be taken. I have spoken to vice-chancellors this week and our home universities are already looking for students with lower grades to fill the spaces left by EU students who have fallen away. We need to be aware of that and ensure that oversupply does not lead to a downgrade in quality.

Turning to social mobility, any graduate—my daughters, for example—will be in the marketplace for 50 years. That is an awfully long time and not one person who comes to this place will have had the same job for
50 years. We need to take a more flexible approach. We have spoken too much about the young—important though they are and mother of loads as I am—but mature students and part-time students also have needs.

The right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) mentioned the statistics for Oxford and Cambridge, but he failed to take account of the fact—that this is the crux of the argument—that some of the young people to whom I speak in my constituency are looked-after children, family carers and mothers. They do not have the flexibility just to choose a university. That is why reputation, quality and availability are so important. This is not about being able to go to top-flight universities; it is about being enabled to rise.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady stimulates me to intervene. It is very dangerous to talk about top-flight universities. I represent Huddersfield, which has a wonderful university with some of the best departments in the country, including for design, innovation and engineering. It is very easy to say what is top flight and what is not. Many of our departments are better than those at Cambridge, and I am sitting next to my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner).

Jo Churchill: Indeed you are. The words “top flight” came from the top of my head and I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman. My daughters have enjoyed red brick universities, but my friends’ children have been to all manner of providers, including good further education colleges and good apprenticeship schemes. There are fewer degree apprentices at the moment, because that system has not filtered through. More than anything, people need the appropriate qualifications.

I do not want to go on about the statistics around white young men and those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, because they speak for themselves. I would instead like to articulate the situation of career changers: mature members of our society who, in their 30s and 40s, when they have mortgages and children, want to change careers. That includes the nurses who want to become doctors, and the parliamentarians who want to change careers. That includes the nurses who want to become doctors, and the parliamentarians who want to become teachers.

John Pugh: Where are they?

Jo Churchill: Exactly. All manner of people who might want to take a different career path are precluded from doing so because they cannot get the appropriate qualifications, and we need to look at that. I was lucky when I did my MSc as a mature student, because I lived in Nottingham. The hon. Lady whom I followed; I am sorry, I cannot remember her constituency—[HON. MEMBERS: “Walthamstow!”]. She spoke articulately about need, and made a good point about the 3% in the system being such a small number, and it is. However, when I was a mature student under the previous Labour Government, I could not access support to help me with nursery fees for my four small children or to help me with my MSc. Things have not got better, and the Bill will allow us to start to push things forward. So although I am open to criticism, I think that what the hon. Lady said was a little unfair.

Earlier in the debate, Members spoke about collaboration and the need to make collaboration mandatory for institutions, and I would like to use East Anglia as an exemplar of joined-up thinking. Next to us sits Cambridge University, which has the most money for research; the University of East Anglia is a leading university in Norfolk; and the new University Campus Suffolk, which has just been granted the ability to award degrees, is a community university. That blend offers people choice. That university in Suffolk, which has a campus in my constituency, has a member of the LEP and the local authority on the board. We need to encourage that sort of thing rather than making collaboration mandatory. They talked to further education providers, schools and businesses about how to fill the gaps in IT and engineering and to boost productivity, looking at nuclear power, farming, health and care. That is what I want the Bill to support.

5.22 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I echo the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) in welcoming the fact that the Minister survived the ministerial cull and is still in his place, because I think he has brought a—[INTERUPTION.] He is defying my words at the moment; I was going to say how good he is at listening. I am over here!

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Will the Front Benchers take note of this? The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) is making reference to the Front Benchers, and they appear to be having a conversation. I am sure that everybody wants to hear what the hon. Gentleman wants to say.

Mr Sheerman: My hon. Friend was trying to be nice.

Paul Blomfield: I will continue to be nice, because I recognise the thought and effort that the Minister has put into developing the Bill. I commend him for the way in which he has listened to those across the sector and other stakeholders in shifting thinking, as discourse has moved forward. There is a lot more listening to do, because there are still a number of reservations.

The Bill raises some very important issues: on teaching quality, clearly; on widening participation; on opening the debate on credit accumulation and transfer; and on several other areas. Sadly, however, as other hon. Members have highlighted, those are not necessarily the key challenges for the sector right now. The Secretary of State was right to say in her opening remarks that our university system punches above its weight. Our universities are hugely important in the transformational impact they have on those who study in them, in building the skills base of our country and in contributing over £11 billion to our export earnings, and this hugely successful sector of course contributes through research and innovation to the wider development of our economy. We have one of the world’s best university systems, but universities face real challenges, many of which, frankly, are not covered by the Bill.

Let me turn back to Brexit. The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds said that we should look at the opportunities of Brexit. Whether we describe them as opportunities or as challenges, there are real issues to face. She highlighted the fact that we are in the top 10 for research. One reason for that is the enormous funding we have had through FP7—Horizon 2020, as it is now—from the European Union. The EU is spending
about £70 billion through Horizon 2020, and until 23 June more was allocated to British-led partnerships than to any other member state. Without that, our research capacity will be deeply affected, with huge economic consequences.

The Minister will recall that I asked him, just days after the Brexit vote, what action he was taking to protect that funding. Reassuringly, he said that we should not worry about anything for the next couple of years because we would still be in the European Union and fully accessing Horizon 2020. That was not an unreasonable answer at that moment—I would have probably given the same one—but when I talked to the vice-chancellors of my two universities in Sheffield two days later, they both reported that locally led research teams had been asked to pull out of trans-European projects bidding for Horizon 2020, because a UK research team would be a drag on securing funding, given all the associated uncertainty. Mike Galsworthy, who is the director of Scientists for EU, has been trying to monitor the impact on research. He reports that already—just a couple of weeks on—of the 378 responses he has received from research teams, over a quarter are reporting difficulties because everyone fears the risk of having a team from non-EU Britain as a partner.

The Government therefore need, and I hope that the Minister will address this when he winds up, to consider urgently—more urgently than many of the other issues covered by the Bill—what he intends to do to offset the impact we are already seeing. He should commit to underwriting all Horizon 2020 funding to give research teams the reassurance that they can go forward confidently without letting down their partners. He should also talk to those quite close to him—[Interruption] I was thinking of a different form of relationship, but that one will do—about making an early commitment to putting Horizon 2020 at the top of the agenda in our negotiations on what post-Brexit Britain will look like.

The second issue is about recruiting and retaining talent. Between our two universities in Sheffield, there are 406 EU nationals on a salary of less than £35,000. That figure is important because it means that they would not meet the criteria for successful tier 2 visa applications. These are early-career academics—the talent of the future—who will be driving the research and the teaching quality of the future in our universities. Unless we can give them the confidence that they and their successors from European countries can come to this country to work, teach and research in our universities, we will be severely weakening our talent base.

Such issues are not addressed in the Bill, but it threatens to do more damage in the third area of concern in universities, which is international students—an issue on which the Minister and I agree, and about which many Government Members have made the same point. As the right hon. Member for East Devon (Mr Swire) pointed out, the Home Office has done enormous damage to our ability to compete in the growing international marketplace to recruit international students. Brexit threatens greater damage in relation not just to the 185,000 EU students who are here, but to the 320,000 or so non-EU students. Hobsons, the major international student recruitment consultants, reported just a couple of weeks before the Brexit vote that about a third of non-EU nationals considering coming to the UK would find Britain a less attractive place to study if it exited the European Union, and one can understand why.

The Bill could make the situation worse by undermining the strength of the UK’s university brand through the teaching excellence framework. A one-level TEF might not have that consequence, because it would be a straightforward exercise that, subject to ticking certain boxes, most universities would glide through. However, the subsequent grading system creates a risk of brand damage, because we are developing it unilaterally. If we were measuring our universities equitably in parallel and in partnership with every country in the world, perhaps it would be different, but we are not. We are stepping outside what our competitors are doing and saying that we will spotlight our universities in a very different way. We will say that some are okay, some are outstanding and some are excellent. That will send out the message about those that do not reach the very top grade that international students ought to think twice about going there. I appreciate that that is not the Government’s intention, but it is a potential consequence that they need to consider closely. We already have a quality assurance system through the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education that is widely respected around the world.

If the Government are going down the TEF route, let us get it right. The thinking on this is significantly underdeveloped. I welcome the way in which, during the discussion about teaching quality, the Minister has moved away from an overdependence on quantitative metrics towards a more qualitative approach that involves institutions in the assessment process. However, there is still a focus on quantitative metrics that, as other Members have highlighted, are deeply flawed.

Employment destination is a key metric, but we all know that that is an unsatisfactory way of measuring teaching quality. Someone who comes from the right family, goes to the right school, goes to the right university and comes out with a passable degree will get a good job, because they have the contacts. [Interruption.] I did not catch the Minister’s observation, but I have no doubt he will make his point later. Employment destination might be a measure of the privilege someone was born into, but it is not a measure of teaching quality. We know that privately educated students are more likely to get a good degree than state educated students. We also know that graduate destination can be affected by the regional economy, so it is a very unsatisfactory metric.

In trying to widen participation, I admire the Government’s focus not simply on entry to university, but on success at university and beyond. However, using retention as a metric is potentially flawed, because the easiest way—I am not for a moment suggesting that any of our universities would do this—to get a good retention score is not to accept students who are likely to fail.

Jo Churchill: I agree with that point. A problem with the lack of flexibility in the system is that it does not allow those who have more disconnected lives to be iterative with a degree by going out and back in. That is a problem if Members across the House want to improve social mobility. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to be more flexible to allow those whose lives do not conform to the three-year pattern to have access?
Paul Blomfield: I agree with the hon. Lady—I thank her for her intervention, which, like much of the rest of the debate, reflects cross-party concern about the detail of the Bill.

Other hon. Members referred to the research excellence framework as a model for the TEF, but the research excellence framework took time to develop—there was trial and error, remodelling and rethinking. The research excellence framework was not put together with the pace that the TEF has been put together, and nor was it put together without trialling or in a way that creates such risks. That is why, as the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) said, the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee said that the Government needed to do more to demonstrate that the metrics relate to teaching quality. Until they do, we cannot be confident that we will get this right.

The Secretary of State said that there was limited thinking among the Opposition, in that we thought that new providers could not possibly be as good as traditional universities. I do not accept that. Equally, I hope the Government accept that there are risks. In the last Parliament, they got their fingers burnt with new providers. We have seen in the higher education landscape in the United States, which some fear is the model the Government are looking to, the damage caused by an insufficiently well-regulated system, in which commercial operators came in, milked the public funds provided through the federal loans system without regard to the quality of education offered or the consequences for those who go through it, and leave them to pick up the debt. Everybody was misled at each stage of the process, which is why so many private providers face federal and state prosecution in the United States. Unless we get the regulatory framework right in the Bill, there will be risks.

I know the Minister is committed to getting the regulatory framework right, but the problem is that we do not know what it will look like. I have asked written questions about it, but we still do not know. He can correct me if I am wrong, but in response to a recent written question, he indicated that we will not know what the regulatory portal and subsequent framework look like in detail until the Bill passes. That is not good enough.

I am conscious of the time and of other Members’ desire to contribute. There is so much more in the Bill, but I will leave my remarks there.

5.37 pm

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield)—I should call him my hon. Friend—who is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on students. I am the vice-chair, and it is a pleasure working with him to champion students across our country. I agree with some of the points he made.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on continuing in his position, on his work over the past year in championing the Bill, and on engaging with the sector more than any other Minister for Universities and Science. That is to his credit and to the credit of the Secretary of State, who spoke earlier. It was great to see him on the Front Bench.

When black people and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds struggle to get on in life, the Conservative party has a responsibility to put our country together again and focus on unity. All the key components of that one nation narrative can be applied coherently to the Bill. We have a responsibility, as I have seen in conversations with my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) when reading the Bill, to ensure that those who have not necessarily had the best start in life can get on. That is a deep Conservative message of aspiration.

My parents never went to university; I was the first one in my family to go. My father was the breadwinner and my mother was disabled. In the 1980s, my parents aspired to become a middle-class family by saving up enough money to get me and my brother through university. Now my brother is a doctor and, well, I am here. That is a great testament to my parents and their determination over the years. As a new MP, I want to enable others in my constituency to follow their own dreams. That is why I rise today in wholehearted support of the Bill.

The changes to the higher education system in 2011 aimed to improve the student experience and the teaching they receive. On the whole, the changes have improved the higher education system, encouraging more students to go to university and improving social mobility. It became clear, however, that the regulatory system did not match what students wanted. There is a need to create a body to check that universities are using the increased funds to improve teaching and resources.

The opportunity to gain a degree in a subject you enjoy or that will help to get the career of your dreams is important for so many in the United Kingdom. The experiences gained in one of our higher education institutions, whether at the age of 18 or as a mature student, are invaluable and often change people’s lives. I am pleased that a record number of students are going to university as a result of the cap being lifted, with them taking the opportunity to advance their minds as well as themselves. However, these students must be the focus of the university. This long-awaited Higher Education and Research Bill will put students at the heart of the regulatory system. The office for students will be able to monitor and improve institutions. It is set to be full of experts in the field, who can judge the quality of teaching being given by universities.

I am proud to represent a city that has two world-leading universities: Bath Spa University and the University of Bath, which is ranked one of the best universities for student satisfaction year-on-year. I do not want other MPs to try to take that accolade away from us, but good luck. I am concerned, however, about my young constituents who travel elsewhere and do not necessarily get a teaching experience comparable to the fees they end up paying.

Going to university is a big financial investment and students need to be safe in the knowledge that there is a body to ensure that they receive excellent quality teaching that will set them up for a superb graduate life. The new framework and the office for students will monitor teaching quality and provide broad ideas about how best quality teaching can be achieved. This will be done without telling an institution how it should teach or assess or what content should be in their courses. That independence for universities is crucial, as it means they can maintain the individual flair that attracts students, while providing excellent teaching. The new scrutiny will provide an assurance to students about the excellence of the teaching they will receive, and that they will have the skills that employers are looking for. In the west of
England, the G4W group of universities is working closely to ensure that businesses and universities work together to deliver skills in the interests of our regional economy. That example will be improved and enhanced across the rest of the United Kingdom as a result of the framework in the Bill. I hope other areas of the country, with their devolved settlements, will be able to deliver just that.

I want to turn to the teaching excellence framework, the measure by which the teaching quality of universities will be assessed. The new framework will finally bring together teaching in line with funding for research, as teaching funding will be linked to quality, not just quantity. That is important, as it prevents universities from focusing too much on mass, often sub-par education, and ensures that those they invite to study are their priority. I have to admit that when I speak to students up and down the country—this has been the case since 2011—many student bodies and student union organisations say time and again that fees have increased but the quality of education and teaching has not necessarily increased with them. That has been a great frustration for students.

It is important that the Government make it clear well in advance what makes a good course value for money, so that universities can tweak their current practices using the guidance provided. It will be difficult to measure such different styles, even across the leading universities, but I urge the Government to come up with a coherent, easy-to-understand set of qualities and priorities that universities can install, so that they can be confident of receiving the highest quality rating. I hope that in Committee we can focus on the quantitative, not just the qualitative side, which obviously has come up several times, and which no doubt the Minister will talk about when he sums up.

The university quality rating will be an invaluable tool for prospective students choosing between the hundreds of higher education institutions across the country. Alex Neill from Which?, an organisation that exists to promote consumer choice and information, said:

“Our research has shown that students struggle to obtain the information they need to make informed decisions about university choices. We welcome measures to give students more insight into student experience, teaching standards and value for money... These proposals could not only drive up standards, but could also empower students ahead of one of the biggest financial decisions of their lives.”

Deciding to go to university is easy for some people, but not for everybody. It is a big decision—the choice of course or institution can make or break a person’s future—and there are many tools available that talk about student experience, teaching style and support, but it is difficult to compare teaching quality, and with all universities raving about how good they are, it is unlikely they would wish to champion such a tool. The Bill will provide students with invaluable and directly comparable data on the quality of teaching they can expect at each institution. I would have found such information incredibly helpful when I was making that choice.

Michelle Donelan: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill gives students the opportunity not just to gamble and take a chance on their future but to make an informed decision so that they might have the best opportunities in life and get real value for money?

Ben Howlett: I completely agree with my hon. Friend and near neighbour. Since 2011, students have said many times that they want more information, and in this digital age, it should not be too difficult to go online and find out in one place what information is available to help them make these choices. I hope that the Careers and Enterprise Company will end up streamlining careers advice and guidance, but the Bill will put at the heart of the system the student making that choice with the information freely available to them.

When fees rose in 2011, teaching quality was supposed to improve with it, and this new regime focusing on teaching quality will be supported by the cap on the fees that a university can charge if it is not hitting the highest teaching quality. This power provides a good stick to prevent universities from disregarding teaching quality, which I know the universities sector has long championed. I have been contacted by key stakeholders in the universities sector concerned that, although they are keen to offer students the best value for money and excellent teaching, these changes will come at the expense of the postgraduate sector, particularly the science, technology, engineering and maths research that is so crucial to our economic development—it is a main component of what the University of Bath specialises in. The Minister has provided me with reassurances, but I hope that he can reassure the entire House that the postgraduate sector will still be able to bloom, while teaching in undergraduate degrees improves.

I have focused on the measures that will improve the student experience. I turn now to the provisions in the Bill providing for more data on diversity and inclusion in our universities. As part of the registration process with the new office for students, it will be a condition that institutions publish admissions stats on gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic background. Given the disconnect in our society at the moment, there is no better time to deliver on this crucial part of the Bill. The data will include the numbers of applications from these groups and—crucially—how many are accepted. I am sure that this publicity will encourage institutions to become increasingly inclusive and provide good tools to identify trends and what policies might be needed to address any shortcomings.

For too long students have been asking for better quality teaching. They want to get a degree, but they also want to receive the best quality education to equip them for their future careers. I am pleased that the Government have taken action, finishing what they started with their changes to higher education in 2011. Students can now be confident that their education is being scrutinised. I hope that the Bill will put students’ minds at rest and reassure them that their institution has good teaching quality and cares about the experience as much as the research side. Sadly, as we all know, this has not always been the case, and I am concerned that a lack of focus is sometimes left, with some students leaving university feeling quite deflated.

I urge all Members to do what the former shadow Business Secretary, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), unfortunately failed to do in the Queen’s Speech debate, when she failed to mention exactly what
students want. At the heart of that, this Government have listened to what students actually want. Students want to see better quality teaching and better quality of future outcomes. We should listen to the students and what they are asking for. Ultimately, the Bill delivers on that, and I look forward to voting for it with the Government in the Lobby later today.

5.50 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett). Bath is another beautiful university city. I live in Cambridge, a city of universities. Of course, almost everyone knows of the University of Cambridge, and most people now know of Anglia Ruskin University, which has expanded and improved dramatically over the last decade, particularly under the excellent leadership of the recently retired Vice-Chancellor, Mike Thorne. In Cambridge, we have also enjoyed the Open University and the University of the Third Age, so there is something for everyone, and a precious eco-system that we do not want to risk being disrupted.

Cambridge also has a number of other educational establishments that feed off the Cambridge brand, and one of my concerns is that if we rush to encourage new providers, we must make sure that the quality of the Cambridge brand and others is not tarnished. I am told that when a similar exercise was undertaken in New Zealand a few years ago and a couple of new entrants did not stay the course, the reputational knock-on effect led to a drastic fall in foreign students for the established institutions over the following years—along, of course, with the consequent financial costs—so I say we should be careful here.

Let me start by following on from the excellent points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). In facing the Brexit challenge, it is absolutely clear that the sector is suffering from instability and uncertainty. I echo the suggestion of many of my hon. Friends that now might not be the time for undertaking more major reforms. Our research institutions and universities currently face a real challenge to maintain our global reputation, and we should not make it any more difficult for them.

I am not saying that the existing regulatory frameworks in place for our universities and research are perfect. Of course they are not, and of course they could be simplified and improved. What I do say, however, is that now is the time for safeguards and support for our higher education providers and research councils—not for further disruption. Let us not rock the boat when we are already faced with such unsteady waters.

 Plenty of people are making this point. Perhaps not surprisingly, the University and College Union has asked the Government to stop and wait. It sensibly called for an “immediate nonpartisan inquiry into how we can ensure that our colleges and universities stop and wait. It sensibly called for an “immediate nonpartisan competition, choice and the student’s interest at its heart”. That sequence of phrasing raises a further problem—that competition is being put first, and the student’s interest put last. Let us take, for example, the provision that would see new entrants into the higher education market given the ability to compete on equal terms with existing institutions and to immediately possess powers to award their own degrees, albeit on a probationary basis. As I have suggested, there are real risks here. It could dilute the trusted UK brand, risking our country’s reputation for educational excellence on the international stage. The Public Accounts Committee has already found standards at some private providers to be lacking, saying: “The Department has failed to protect the interests of legitimate students, and the taxpayer.”

The Russell Group has urged the Government to consider a longer period of enhanced scrutiny and peer review to help maintain the UK’s reputation and high standards, and I agree that ensuring the high quality of any institution afforded degree-awarding powers is paramount.

The increased marketisation that this proposal signifies could also threaten providers, and could, in some cases, lead to what we call “market exit”. That might be quite dramatic. The closure of such institutions, whether they are vocationally orientated or traditional international-facing universities, would have a significant, and possibly more than significant, impact on local communities and students. A survey undertaken by the now defunct Department for Business, Innovation and Skills showed that less than half of alternative providers had a student protection plan to implement in the event of “market exit”. Moreover, if providers fail, who will pick up the tab? What will be the effect on the other institutions? I think we need to know the answers to some of these questions.

The National Union of Students has called the marketisation of higher education a “failed experiment”, and has chastised the Government for trying to “turn students into consumers.” I hope that the Government will think again, and will recognise that creating a conveyor belt of higher education providers risks doing real damage to the dynamic, trusted institutions that have been built over so many centuries in our country.

The proposed teaching excellence framework will allow some universities to charge tuition fees rising in line with inflation. While it is fair, and welcome, to highlight the importance of teaching quality, the removal of the fee cap in what can only be described as a slightly underhand way is not very welcome. Another issue of concern relating to the TEF is the splitting of research and teaching oversight between the office for students and UK Research and Innovation. The Royal Society rightly points out that “today’s PhD content is tomorrow’s course content”, and, as the University of Cambridge tells me, the close and mutually beneficial relationship between teaching and research—their interdependency—is a central tenet of UK university excellence. Consequently, it is important for the TEF to recognise the value of research-led teaching in its assessment criteria.

I appreciate that the review of the research excellence framework is currently under way and expected soon, and I am sure we all await its conclusions on how the assessment of teaching and research quality will be streamlined and interlinked, but I think that there must be a strong requirement for co-operation between the office for students and UKRI.
The implications for wider research are profound. Let me say in passing that an omission in the Bill is the lack of provision for post-graduate student supervision: there is more to be said on that. I think. The Bill restructures our country’s research base by revoking the royal charters of the current research councils and bringing them under the umbrella of the new body that will be created when UK Research and Innovation is merged with Innovate UK. Lord Rees, who has already been quoted today—a very wise voice from Cambridge, and a former president of the Royal Society—has observed that while reshuffling the administrative structure of our research councils is “seductive”, it “may not prove either necessary or sufficient, and may indeed be counterproductive.”

It is positive that the Bill at least hints at codifying a long-standing convention, the principle of dual funding, but many have observed that the wording is vague, possibly less clear than that in the White Paper, and that the “reasonable balance” referred to in the Bill is insufficient. I hope that the Minister can give us a stronger commitment today, because dual funding is key, and quality-related funding for research is essential.

The integration of Innovate UK into UK Research and Innovation also raises questions. While we are assured that Innovate UK will retain a separate budget and its own business-facing outlook, I think I am right in saying that Members of the House of Lords have already queried the merger and its impact on the independence of the research councils. I am sure that that will be examined closely in Committee.

Let me end by returning to my opening observations. Our research community is already under great pressure, despite the Government’s reassurance that the European referendum result has “no immediate effect” on those applying to or participating in Horizon 2020. As a net recipient of EU funding, science research in particular will be hit hard by Brexit, and although the Universities Minister said recently that “nothing has changed overnight”, I think we can see that it is perhaps a false calm. Dual funding may not prove either necessary or sufficient, and may indeed be counterproductive.

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Research and higher education are intimately intertwined with free movement, European alliances and investment, but we may still be years away from knowing what kind of settlement will finally emerge. Before we can begin to think about reforming our vital higher education and research sectors, we must be absolutely sure of our place in Europe and in the wider world. The Government say that it is business as usual, but I say that these sectors are just too important to our country’s economy, and to our society, for us to take further risks in such uncertain times.

6 pm

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): As a new Back Bencher, I feel fortunate to have the chance to contribute to this debate; it has been well-subscribed, and conducted in the generous spirit one would expect of any education debate. And we have learned a lot, as we would expect in any education debate. We have learned that the University of Aberdeen is staying true to its internationalist foundations at a time of change. We have learned that my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) is that rare thing on the Conservative Benches, a Guardian reader. We have also learned from his skilled powers of observation that the new Secretary of State for Education is slightly less blonde than the Minister for Universities and Science, but one of the things his observation has reinforced in my mind is that blondeness is clearly a quality that brings preferment under this new Government—and I know where I went wrong.

I also thank the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden) for his contribution from the Front Bench for the Labour party. He was a distinguished editor of History Today and an outstanding Open University lecturer, but I fear that in his speech today he did not do himself justice. His speech was 45 minutes long, which is some 12 minutes longer than Mozart’s longest symphony, and during those 45 minutes, while there was a great deal of criticism of the Government’s proposals, there was precious little that was fresh, original or new in terms of policy vision. As an education reformer, he is not yet ready to join the ranks of Rab Butler, Lord Robbins or H.A.L. Fisher. It was a pity that instead of what we used to have from Labour—a comprehensive vision of education, education, education—we had instead prevarication, obfuscation and mystification. It is, I fear, sadly reflective of the condition in which the Labour party now finds itself—of the fact that a party that was once committed to the improvement of education, the extension of opportunity to all and radical reform to bring that about now has so little to say. That is not a criticism of the hon. Gentleman or indeed of those who spoke from the Labour Back Benches today; it is just an observation of the fact that there was once intellectual fertility, there is now, sadly, aridity. But I wish my colleagues on the Labour Back Benches well as they try to ensure their party rediscovers its radicalism and policy vitality.

May I contrast the lack of ideas, fizz and energy on the Labour Front Bench with the qualities displayed by our new Secretary of State in her remarks opening this debate? I had the opportunity to remark earlier on the fact that our new Secretary of State has made extending social mobility the hallmark of all the roles she has taken in Government. She spoke eloquently and from the heart about her own personal journey and her commitment as a graduate of Southampton University and as a comprehensive school girl who was the first in her family to go to university to extend to others the opportunity she herself has enjoyed. It is a promising sign that she now leads a fused and reinvigorated Department for Education that covers the support of children from the moment of birth right up to the point at which they go on to an apprenticeship or into university. It was a mistake of Gordon Brown to separate universities—to make them orphans first of all in the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, and then to have them spatchcocked into the business Department—because I feel an unnecessarily narrow and utilitarian approach was taken towards higher and technical education.

The restoration of a Department that sees education in the round and takes a holistic approach to human development and intellectual inquiry is all to the good,
and the Secretary of State is absolutely the right person to lead it, and the Minister for Universities and Science, who has already proved himself a distinguished higher education Minister, is the right person to take this Bill forward in Committee.

It is appropriate that we legislate at this stage because this Bill is a sequel, in a way, to the changes we introduced under the coalition. It was the Browne report into higher education finance and the decisions taken by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr Cameron), and indeed Vince Cable when he was Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, that ensured that we were able to place the financing of higher education on a sustainable footing for the future. Almost uniquely among European nations, our higher education system is solvent as a result of the courageous decisions that they took. He will not thank me for mentioning it, but the former leader of the Liberal Democrats, the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg), displayed both courage and principle in rejecting his election promise and embracing the right policy outcome. Although he paid a political price for that decision, we should record that it was right, not just for the solvency of our higher education institutions, but also for access. As a result of those changes, more children from poorer backgrounds, and from working-class and disadvantaged homes, now go to university than ever before, and that is a direct result of the courage and coherence of the reforms that were made to funding. Having made those funding reforms, we must now complete the story and ensure reforms to the structure and quality of higher education, so that we maintain our position of global leadership.

Let us be in no doubt that universities across the United Kingdom are global leaders, and some of our finest institutions are among the top 20 universities in the world. Those include not just established institutions of great antiquity such as Oxford and Cambridge, but London’s universities, which are outstanding in research, teaching and their capacity to improve our productivity. We are fortunate that changes in the Bill will ensure that the position of global leadership that we currently enjoy will only be enhanced.

I welcome the fact that the Bill will lead to the development of new challenger higher education institutions. As the Secretary of State made admirably clear, at every point in our history, whenever it has been suggested that we expand the number of higher education institutions, “small-c” conservative voices have always said that more would mean worse. The Anglican clergy used to insist on a monopoly on higher education and research quality in an educational institution and empirically steward of his responsibilities. The TEF allows us to compare different types of institutions to be compared in a way that allows meaningful lessons to be drawn for undergraduates and for the Government.

Mr Marsden: Let me make it clear that we were not saying that the TEF was a one-size-fits-all measure. We were saying that the basis on which it was going to operate during the first year was one size fits all. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will remember that I went on to talk about the need for the TEF to be more disaggregated so that we could look at it within universities. That process might yet come forward.

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that clarification. Indeed, in the constructive spirit in which most of this debate has been held, I welcome what he says and entirely accept that this is a move towards greater consensus.

One concern that people sometimes have about an emphasis on quality is that it somehow runs counter to the important principle of access, and that there somehow has to be a tension between maintaining rigorous teaching and research quality in an educational institution and broadening access. I do not think that there is necessarily a tension between the two, and neither do those who lead our universities. It has been conspicuous, over the past six years and beyond, how energetic vice-chancellors and others have been in ensuring that they can broaden access to higher education.

I would make the point, however, that while universities have worked hard and collaborated with the Department for Education in its previous incarnations to try to influence the curriculum and examinations in such a way as to maximise access to the benefits that higher education can bring, still more could be done. I do not accuse any institution or individual of bad faith, but I believe that there is additional potential for higher education institutions to, as it were, get their hands dirty in the business of improving secondary education. As I have mentioned, King’s College London has helped to set up a new maths free school which will ensure that...
[Michael Gove]
gifted students from across the state sector have an opportunity to graduate to the mathematic and scientific degree courses that our country needs. It would be a wholly good thing if more universities were to follow the example of those that have been in the lead in sponsoring academies. In saying that, I am simply reiterating the case that has already been made so brilliantly by my Friend in the other place, Lord Adonis.

As well as ensuring that we improve access, the Bill makes it clear that academic freedom must be defended. The National Union of Students—a distinguished former president of which sits on the Opposition Benches—has often been an effective steward and safeguard of undergraduates' interests. At the moment, however, there are voices and individuals within the NUS who have not upheld the best traditions of academic freedom and who have in some respects created a chilling environment and a cold home for students, particularly those who are Jewish. I applaud the work that has already been done by the Minister of State in ensuring that academic freedom is not simply an abstract question of academics being allowed to publish, debate and discuss, and that it must also be about ensuring that our universities are places where individuals can feel confident that they are respected and that their intellectual journey will be allowed to proceed in safety, whatever their background.

That brings me to my final point. A number of speakers in the debate have talked about Britain's departure from the European Union as though it were a cataclysm, the like of which this country had never endured before—a sort of Noah's flood that will bring devastation to our institutions. I respect the fact that passions were engaged during the referendum debate and that those who argued that we should remain were sincere in their belief that leaving the European Union would bring problems and challenges for our higher education institutions. All I would say is that if we look at continental Europe—I mean no criticism of those countries—we can see that there are no world-class universities in the eurozone that could take their place alongside the universities of this country or indeed of the United States of America or south and east Asia.

The spirit of intellectual inquiry—and, indeed, international collaboration—that marks out all our best universities globally does not depend on membership of any political union or subscription to any bureaucratic system. It depends on a belief in honest inquiry, a desire to go where the truth takes you and a commitment always to have an open mind to new facts, new experiences and new people. I am confident that those who lead our universities will take the opportunity that the Bill gives them to ensure that the superb work they do remains open to students from across this world, so that our higher education sector, which has done so much to strengthen our economy and to make this country such a very special place, can proceed into the future with confidence.

6.14 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) after his relatively recent return to the Back Benches. Whatever disagreements the Opposition may have had with his various policies over the years, it is encouraging to see that while the Government may have lost his voice the House has not, as we have seen in recent days. I am sorry to have to associate myself with his remarks about the National Union of Students, in particular its lack of care towards Jewish students and Jewish representation. It is sad day when I find myself agreeing with the right hon. Gentleman on that.

UK higher education is a global success story, but that success has been put in jeopardy by the decision to leave the European Union. Our institutions currently have 125,000 students and 43,000 staff from other EU member states. Since the creation of the Erasmus scheme, some 200,000 British students have benefited from opportunities to study abroad. Our membership of the EU has added 15% to our universities' income, not least through the £687 million in research income, from which the UK benefits disproportionately as a result of our strength and excellence in research. Against that backdrop, leaving the European Union provides significant challenges for the sector, and the Bill introduces unnecessary risk and uncertainty that the sector can no longer afford.

With some notable exceptions, this House needs a degree of modesty about the lack of scientific expertise across its Benches and should draw wisdom instead from expertise in the House of Lords. The dual support system for funding research in our universities has been vital to our higher education sector's success, so we should pay particular heed to the warnings of the Astronomer Royal Lord Rees, already referred to in this debate, from prior to the referendum when he described changes to the research councils outlined in the Bill as "drastic." He was right then, but he is even more right today. It is a risk, a distraction, and an unnecessary reorganisation that we cannot afford. When winding up, the Minister ought to tell us what benefits this huge disruption will bring because it seems that any potential benefits are far outweighed by the costs.

The Bill continues apace the marketisation of our higher education system, which has been allowed to go unchecked without sufficient protections and rights for students for far too long. Nowhere is that more evident than in the provisions to allow new private providers to set up shop with degree-awarding powers from day one. What would stop the Donald J. Trump university opening in the UK? It could have degree-awarding powers from day one and then, a few years down the line, following inspection—I am sure that the Donald J. Trump university would not stand up to much—let us assume that it just chooses to up sticks and reinvest somewhere else. What protections and safeguards would there be for students?

The White Paper and the Bill refer to protection and the possibility of the OfS awarding degrees. I am proud of the degree that I got from my university—it is unlikely that my university would go bust, but we would certainly be in trouble if it did—but the idea that people who work hard at their chosen university for a degree could suddenly find that their certificate reads “Office for Students” instead of the name of their university is not reassuring. Students have for too long been an afterthought in the debate around reform of the higher education sector.

Turning to the office for students, its name is on the door, but there is no seat at the table for students. It is entirely unjustifiable to call something the office for students when there is no guaranteed representation for
students. There was an entire White Paper called “Students at the Heart of the System” and the new Secretary of State used that exact phrase in her opening remarks, but students barely get a mention in the sector’s accountability regime. We should ensure, as a bare minimum, that student representation on the board of the office for students is guaranteed. It may well be that in the current climate that place is not reserved for the NUS specifically, but there are plenty of able student representatives in higher education institutions across the country and they deserve a seat at the top table.

Let me give a broader critique of the sector and what it has done for students. I bow to no one in my love and passion for the UK higher education sector, which is a national and international success story. I have been involved in debates on higher education for some time, so forgive me if I am impatient at the fact that we are still talking about problems that have existed for many years. Too many of our academically elite universities remain socially elite. I get frustrated when I hear of so-called “widening participation success stories” from institutions that have appalling retention data and graduate destination data.

The right hon. Member for Surrey Heath alluded to the fact that the benefits, purpose and value of higher education have always extended beyond simple utilitarianism, and whether that is about graduates getting jobs or companies getting patents, there is a bigger vision and mission. It is about the exploration of humanity, expanding our horizons, having a deeper understanding of ourselves, our culture and our society, and pushing the boundaries of scientific exploration. But we should never forget that for many students, particularly those from backgrounds like mine, although it is of course lovely to go to university and make new friends and to engage in a deeper knowledge of one’s subject, it is also essential that that higher education experience delivers the transformational impact that is so often promised when students apply but that can so often be found lacking afterwards.

Too many institutions are too prepared to pat themselves on the back just for taking students from some of the most deprived communities, be they working-class communities, black and minority ethnic communities, disabled groups or other groups that are under-represented in HE and face particular disadvantage in society. The institutions then take their money, process them through the university conveyor belt and cast them off into the world with no real benefit to their earnings, and with these students having no real sense of direction or purpose in their lives. For too many students, on too many courses, that is the direction taken, and it is simply not acceptable or justifiable. The Government, we in this House and the accountability regime for higher education need to be more robust in challenging that institutional failure.

I am also frustrated about what is happening to so many of the concessions that students and student leaders fought for and won in successive battles, be they on the introduction of tuition fees in 1998, on the introduction of top-up fees in 2004 or on the coalition reforms. So many of the concessions we won—the reintroduction of grants for the poorest students, the increase in the repayment threshold so that it was more generous and even the introduction of the independent Office for Fair Access itself—are being too readily and rapidly undone. That is a betrayal of the promises made by successive Governments, and I would like to suggest a number of changes.

If I were in the Minister’s shoes today, I would be dropping this Bill and starting again. There are three areas in particular where the Government need to do some serious rethinking: funding and finance; transparency and accountability; and the global role of HE. On funding and finance, we have already seen the difficulties presented to departmental budgets and the demands on the Treasury when even simple miscalculations in the assumptions on the resource accounting and budgeting charge and on the level of repayments are made.

I do not wish to rehearse the debate, but we must be honest about the fact—there is an absence of any compelling evidence to the contrary—that the view before the referendum among the overwhelming majority of economists in this country and around the world was that if the UK put it itself on a different course, that would undoubtedly leave the country less well-off than it might otherwise have been. In that context, and given the pressures that will inevitably follow on jobs, inward investment and the labour market, a particular risk is placed on higher education budgets. If graduates are not earning as much as they might otherwise have been, that means less money in the repayment system going back to the Treasury and more pressure upon departmental budgets.

As an opponent of the up-front tuition fee system, which I suffered from in part, the top-up fee system and the coalition’s further reforms, I think it is a terrible mistake that we have ended up with the present system, rather than with some form of proper graduate taxation. I am totally comfortable with the idea of paying more as a graduate and as a beneficiary of higher education. There are particular problems with the principle of having a sticker price up front and with some of the mechanisms of the repayment system that create significant risk for the Government. I am encouraged that others are still engaged in this debate. It is interesting that the Fabian Society has proposals for national insurance education accounts.

As well as looking at the repayment mechanisms, it is more demonstrated that we look at the issue of student maintenance. It is undoubtedly the case, as is well demonstrated by NUS evidence, that too many students within the higher education system, particularly those from poorer backgrounds—not necessarily the poorest, but those from low and middle income backgrounds—struggle to make ends meet. If they find themselves stacking shelves or, as I did, working at Comet, now defunct, to fund my higher education course, there is a cost not just in the time taken at work. There is an opportunity cost, because if students are stacking shelves or pulling pints, they are not in the library, the lecture theatre, sports clubs or student societies and activities—all those opportunities that lead to personal enrichment and success later on in the workplace. It should be a serious cause for concern that too many students still struggle to make ends meet.

We could be far more creative with the current system. I particularly commend to the Minister and the new Secretary of State the proposals put forward by Lord Adonis and Josh MacAlister, the chief executive of Frontline, that where there are shortages in key public sector professions, we should look at what we could do...
by way of remission of repayment of tuition fees. If there was a shortage of social workers in Greater Manchester, for example, and there were graduates who were willing to go there and stick at it, the Government should cover the cost of their tuition fee repayments. There is plenty of scope to think about how to get the best and the brightest graduates into some of our most challenging professions.

On funding and finance, which we debated in Westminster Hall yesterday, it would be unforgivable for the Government to accept the principle that it is okay for Ministers to change the terms and conditions of student finance retrospectively. Not only is it fundamentally unfair to change the terms and conditions for existing students and graduates, but there is a huge risk. Students, especially those from the poorest backgrounds, and their parents and advisers need absolute certainty about what they are signing up for. If they feel that the Government are going to change the terms of the debate further on, that will bring with it serious risk.

On transparency and accountability, as I have mentioned, I think the transparency revolution should be extended to outcomes and graduate success. It is important that the director of the Office for Fair Access should report not just to the board of the office for students, but to this House, given the level of interest across the House. We must challenge some of the bodies associated with higher education about their commitment to transparency.

How can it be justified that UCAS, an organisation on whose board I was proud to serve for two years, when asked for reasonable datasets on applications, particularly from students from disadvantaged backgrounds, continues to supply data in the most inaccessible way possible? It is entirely possible for the very talented data wonks at UCAS to use Excel spreadsheets. They should provide Excel spreadsheets, rather than PDF documents, to people with legitimate demands for data. I hope it will not take an amendment to the Bill to get UCAS to behave more reasonably.

On student representation, as well as the office for students, there should be guaranteed student representation on a statutory footing on the designated quality body and on the governing bodies of higher education institutions, and we should extend the provisions of the 1994 Act to private providers. I rather like the suggestion made by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) for a student bill of rights in higher education.

We need accountability for the way that money is spent within institutions. One of the advantages of putting universities back into the Department for Education is that there is now an opportunity for Ministers covering schools, colleges and universities to look together at the issues of social mobility, widening participation and fair access to universities. I am tired of the hand-wringing of university vice-chancellors and their lobbyists, who claim that it is all the schools’ fault that they cannot get poor Jimmy and Jane from the local state school into some of our academically elite universities. If it is all the school’s fault, then I have a really good idea—take all the widening participation funding from higher education and put it into schools and early years, because vice-chancellors have made a compelling case for transferring that in that way. That is not to denigrate the excellent work done by staff working on widening participation and student recruitment in institutions; they are some of the most passionate and dedicated staff in terms of changing the profile of the student body. However, there is scope to make different and better spending decisions. Universities ought to be justifying how they are spending the money and what its impact really is.

We should have more accountability around the scandal of unjustified pay hikes for university vice-chancellors. Our institutions are very ably led, but against the current backdrop of public finances, I cannot believe that these pay increases are justifiable. The Bill should go so far as to require universities not just to publish vice-chancellors’ pay—a great public service provided by Times Higher Education magazine—but to publish pay ratios between the pay of the university vice-chancellor and the lowest-paid staff.

Finally on accountability, we need more clarity about market exit. What happens if these brave new providers go bust or simply shut up shop? There must be better requirements on these institutions to protect their existing students and their graduates.

On global higher education, we can be enormously proud of the role that our institutions play on the international stage. It has been beyond saddening to read of academics who are being told that their funding is at risk and of conferences that will no longer take place in this country because people feel that, by leaving the European Union, we are closing the door to the outside world. The Minister could do a number of things to address this, but none would be more powerful than removing international students from the net migration cap. There is an overwhelming consensus on that, with support on both sides of the House. The previous Home Secretary was an obstacle to this. I am sure that now she has walked through the door of No. 10, she is far more amenable to the idea as Prime Minister. In all seriousness, there could be no better signal to send to the rest of the world than to say that bright students from across the world are welcome to study here and will be embraced.

Those are just a few thoughts. I am anxious to hear from the Front Benches, and particularly to hear the Minister’s assurance that he will move on the issue of retrospective payments and changes to the student finance system.

6.32 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few words in this debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), who made an excellent speech that covered most of the points that I was going to raise. I have been asked to finish by 6.35 pm, and I will make sure that I do so. It is interesting that my hon. Friend said that we do not have many scientists on these Benches. I am one of the few scientists in Parliament; it would be nice to have some more of us.

First, I want to talk about students. As my hon. Friend said, yesterday we had a debate in Westminster Hall about detrimental changes to student loan repayments. Since 2010, students in our society have been treated in an unscrupulous and unfair way. They have rarely been consulted. Their voices seem to have been ignored throughout policy discussions, and this Bill seems to be
no different. The Government claimed that they set out to make student choice and student interests a central part of their agenda in reforming higher education, but unfortunately they seem to have fallen short on that promise. As my hon. Friend said, there is very little reference to students, or their voices, throughout this Bill. It introduces an office for students but does not mention student representation as part of it. It is absolutely vital that student voices be heard.

The other issue I wish to focus on is the result of the referendum. The parliamentary cycle will now be dominated by Brexit discussions. Until we know what Brexit actually means, and the relationship that we wish to have with and within the EU, this Bill cannot really make any progress. There are more than 125,000 EU students at UK universities, and non-UK EU nationals make up 11.6% of all students at master’s level. International students alone contribute £3.7 billion to the economy. What should happen not only to current students but to prospective students with regard to visa, loan and placement requirements after the 2016-17 academic year? There is no clear and concise policy. Many of the brightest minds come to study at our world-class institutions, and we should look not only to bring them here, but to keep their talents in the UK after they have graduated.

In his research review for the Government, Professor Paul Nurse warned that leaving the EU would jeopardise the world-class science for which the UK is known and that it therefore risked damaging the economy. We now need to discuss the question of retaining or replacing these assets.

6.35 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to her place, and I look forward to having constructive dialogue with her in the future.

We have heard many passionate and expert contributions. The hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), who chairs the Education Committee, said that he has found himself with an unexpectedly large portfolio. It is safe to say that I know that feeling. On that note, as my party’s spokesperson on equality, as well as on education, I echo my hon. Friend. The Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) in urging the Government to make the necessary changes to ensure that loans are Sharia-compliant immediately. I would be interested to hear the Minister’s response to her idea of amending existing legislation instead of making the change in this Bill.

We have spoken a lot about aspiration and supporting the next generation. I cannot help thinking about this evening’s news about my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle). She has been a real friend to me and has been very supportive for many years, both inside and outside this House. She has told many women that female, disabled, black, Asian and minority ethnic students, as well as mature students, would be disproportionately worse off. It is a tax on aspiration. The Government’s equality impact assessment demonstrated the impact on already under-represented groups in higher education. It found that female, disabled, black, Asian and minority ethnic students, as well as mature students, would be disproportionately worse off.

The Secretary of State has made a great deal of the fact that more students from disadvantaged backgrounds are accessing higher education, but she conveniently ignored the figures highlighted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy)—happy birthday,
by the way—which showed that the percentage of disadvantaged pupils admitted by seven of the 24 Russell Group universities, including Oxford and Cambridge, fell over the last decade. At the same time, pupils from private schools are still two and a half times more likely than their state school equivalents to enter a leading university. The Government will perpetuate and extend that by enshrining this two-tier system in the Bill. They are slamming the door of opportunity in the face of young people who have high aspirations and the talent to fulfil them.

I listened carefully to the words of the new Prime Minister on the steps of Downing Street just a few days ago:

“If you’re a white, working-class boy, you’re less likely than anybody else in Britain to go to university. If you’re at a state school, you’re less likely to reach the top professions than if you’re educated privately.”

Yet this Bill does nothing to increase social mobility or to create the one nation Britain that she promised. We will judge her Government by actions, not words.

Then we come to the proposals in the Bill to expand the market for private providers, who are in the education sector primarily to make a profit. The Government appear ideologically committed to marketising higher education by promoting competition and introducing for-profit providers. They have taken a similar approach with schools, and I have yet to see any positive impact. This new profit-driven approach is a real threat to academic quality and standards at a time, post-Brexit, when it is even more critical to maintain and enhance the quality and reputation of Britain’s universities, as has been said by many Members from across the House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). Experience from countries such as the USA and Sweden demonstrates that private providers too often seek to compromise quality for the sake of profit.

I am deeply concerned about the impact of the proposals on the terms and conditions of staff. There is already an unacceptable gender pay gap in the higher education sector, alongside the growing use of zero-hours, temporary and insecure contracts. I fear that the Bill will make matters even worse as employers seek to cut costs in order to produce profits.

Similarly, removing the limit on student numbers for university title is likely to lead to an increase in the number of smaller institutions. Perhaps that is the Government’s intention, but there is a concern that the new smaller institutions may be more likely to cut corners when it comes to resources, student-staff ratios, student support and attracting the best academic staff. What safeguards will the Government provide to prevent that from happening? There are many examples of poor-quality private colleges, particularly those that cater for overseas students, failing to provide high-quality courses. The Government must learn the lessons of those market failures and build in proper oversight and regulation to guarantee quality.

The Bill will also reform the research council and funding system, but we believe that that is poorly timed and likely to be ineffective. Brexit has already put the funding of academic research in the UK into a prolonged period of uncertainty.

Because of the time, I will cut my comments short. I share the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) about Horizon 2020 funding, and it is vital that we ensure confidence in our research sector.

It pains me to say it, but this Bill fails to give our young people a chance to soar. It blocks their path not because they lack ability or aptitude, but because they lack the necessary income or background. The Bill promotes a market-driven, two-tier higher education system in which too many of the brightest and the best will be consigned to second best.

On the steps of Downing Street, the Prime Minister promised:

“When it comes to opportunity, we won’t entrench the advantages of the fortunate few. We will do everything we can to help anybody, whatever your background, to go as far as your talents will take you.”

This Bill does not live up to that promise. Let us hold the Prime Minister to her words, and reject her Bill.

6.45 pm

The Minister for Universities and Science (Joseph Johnson): This has been a terrific debate, in which there has been very strong consensus across the House that our universities rank among the very best in the world, our research base is a global envy and our higher education sector is generating the knowledge and skills that are fuelling our economy and providing the basis for our nation’s intellectual and cultural success.

However, there has also been an acknowledgment in all parts of the House that we can do better still. The world of higher education has changed fundamentally since the last major legislative reforms of 1992. With student number controls now lifted, we are in an era of mass higher education that is no longer limited to the academic elite within a small and primarily Government-funded set of institutions. The majority of funding for undergraduate courses now comes from the students themselves, via Government-backed loans.

The sector has long acknowledged that the current regulatory framework is simply not fit for purpose. We must do more to ensure that young people from all backgrounds are given the opportunity to fulfil their potential and the information they need to make good choices about where and what to study. The Bill provides stability and puts in place the robust regulatory framework that the sector itself agrees is needed. It joins up the very fragmented system of regulation across the current sector, giving us what will be a best-in-class regulatory framework.

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Joseph Johnson: I will not give away for the moment, because I have a significant amount of material to get through in a very limited time.

The Bill creates a level playing field, making it easier for new high-quality providers to compete with established degree-awarding universities. This will drive up innovation, diversity, quality and capacity, ensuring we remain attractive internationally. It will give students better access to information, empowering them to make the best choices
about where to study. It ensures incentives are in place for providers to focus on the quality of the teaching they offer to students.

This Government are committed to equality of opportunity for all. The Bill delivers on that commitment, with a renewed focus on access and participation for disadvantaged students. The new office for students will be required to consider equality of opportunity across the entire student lifecycle, and our reforms to the research landscape will deliver a system that is more agile, flexible and able to respond strategically to future challenges.

This afternoon, we have often heard concerns that now is not the time to proceed with the Bill and that we should press the pause button. That is wrong: the time is right to press ahead, and important sector representatives agree. As Maddalaine Ansell, the chief executive of University Alliance, put it in an article just the other day, the Higher Education and Research Bill “is a raft that can take us to calmer waters”. I urge Opposition Members to get on board.

The Bill delivers on pledges in the Conservative manifesto on which we were elected. It will provide stability for the sector, putting in place a robust regulatory framework. The sector has been calling for this legislation since the tuition fee changes were put in place during the last Parliament, and it welcomes the stability and certainty that the Bill will provide. As GuildHE, another representative body, has put it:

“Pausing on the Bill and risking further damage to our international reputation for quality through regulatory failure would be a mistake”.

Tristram Hunt: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way, because I appreciate that it is so annoying when someone interrupts your lecture. As we know, this is a Brexit Government, and many of the leading Cabinet Ministers promised not only £350 million a week for the NHS, but security for all our science funding. Will the Minister at the Dispatch Box give assurances to Staffordshire University and Keele University in my constituency that all their science funding will be secure by Brexit?

Joseph Johnson: I encourage Opposition Members to be optimistic about our future as a global leader in higher education and science. The UK has been at the centre of scholarship and science for hundreds of years. Many universities were powerhouses of scholarship long before the European Union came into existence, and I am confident that they will continue to be so for years and years to come.

Our universities are world leading and, although it is too early to say what the new EU settlement will be for science, I am confident that they will continue to be so for years and years to come.

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Turning to our rationale for opening the market in the Bill, it is generally accepted that competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game and offers consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) said in her excellent remarks, there is certainly room for improvement. Students’ perception of value for money is continuing to fall. In the Higher Education Policy Institute student experience survey published last month, just 37% of student respondents felt that they received good value for money. That was down from 53% in 2012.

We need to address the fact that many students are starting to ask whether university is worth it. Many employers have similar questions when they look at the labour market mismatch in our economy. While employers are suffering skills shortages, especially in high-skilled STEM areas, at least 20% of graduates are in non-professional roles three and a half years after graduating. If the students who are paying for the system and the taxpayers who are underwriting it are not completely satisfied, the market needs help to adapt. This we will provide as a Government. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who made an outstanding speech, I make no apology for seeking to expand higher education provision and give students more choice and more opportunities at every stage of their lives.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field), I welcome the contribution that alternative providers are making and that they will be able to make all the more easily in future. There is no longer a one-size-fits-all model of university education. Students have a sharper eye for value than ever before and they are calling out, as my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) said, for pioneering institutions offering alternative educational models and an increased focus on skills that will prepare them for the future with the mindset and agility needed to fulfil roles that may not even yet exist. I welcome his engagement with the Milton Keynes institute of technology, which is a flagship for the challenger institutions that we want to come into the sector.

Critically, as other Members have stressed, it is vital that no institution is able to enter our system and access student finance without meeting the very high academic standards that we expect of the sector, as set out in the White Paper. On longevity, we expect institutions to meet the same financial sustainability rules that exist for incumbents. The Bill makes no changes to those demanding requirements. The reforms will, however, make it easier and quicker for new providers to enter the HE market. They will drive innovation, promote choice for students and increase opportunity, but they will also ensure that new providers can enter the market only when they demonstrate that they are able to deliver academic services of the quality that we expect.

The Bill reflects our determination to accelerate social mobility in this country through higher education. When we reformed the student finance system in 2011, including Labour Members, said participation would increase and many other people in Governments across Europe, engaging closely with Commissioner Moedas in Brussels and many other people in Governments across Europe, including my Italian counterpart. I welcome their commitment to ensuring that we will not be discriminated against in the period we find ourselves in. I welcome this morning’s statement by the League of European Research Universities that British universities should not be viewed as a risk to research projects and that they will continue to be “indispensable collaborative partners” in the months and years ahead.

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that finance is no barrier to entry. It is working as a system. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are going to university at a record rate—it is up from 13.6% of the bottom quintile in 2009 to 18.5% in 2015. I am afraid Labour Members were wrong then and they are wrong now. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are 36% more likely to go to university than they were in 2009, but we can and must go further. Our new Prime Minister has rightly prioritised a country that works for everyone and not just the few.

Our reforms in the White Paper and the Bill support that ambition. The Bill introduces a statutory duty on the office for students to promote equality of opportunity across the whole higher education lifecycle for disadvantaged students, and not just at the point of access. That includes Oxbridge and other elite institutions, exactly as the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) would want us to ensure. We will bring together the responsibilities of OFFA and HEFCE for widening access into the new office for students. As part of that body, the new director for fair access and participation will look beyond the point of access into higher education and across disadvantaged students’ entire time in higher education. We will also require higher education providers to publish application, offer and progression rates by gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background.

I welcome the cross-party support for our focus on teaching excellence. We are committed to introducing a teaching excellence framework in our manifesto because we want to drive up teaching standards throughout the sector. The Bill delivers on our pledge to drive up teaching quality and to provide students with robust, comparable information on where teaching is best in the system. It will rebalance the priority given to teaching and learning compared with research, and will mean that the funding of teaching is based on quality, not just quantity—a principle long and successfully established for the funding of research.

On the link between tuition fees and the teaching excellence framework, it is worth noting that the previous Labour Government raised tuition fees in line with inflation in every year from 2007 to 2010, regardless of teaching quality. We will allow fees to rise with inflation each year, as provided for by the Labour Government. Both universities UK and GuildHE—expert sector groups—have made clear that allowing the value of fees to be retained in real terms is essential if universities are to continue to deliver high-quality teaching.

Our reforms go well beyond education and also cover our research base. We have heard comments about our outstanding research base. Its strengths in adding to human knowledge and improving our lives are not in doubt. They will continue to be protected, but we have the opportunity to maximise the benefits of our investment through a strengthened strategic approach, removing the barriers to more inter- and multidisciplinary research, and ensuring that we capitalise on links between our research base and business. We have long recognised the contribution of science and research to our wellbeing and wider economy. Our reforms build on those strengths, placing research and development at the heart of a national industrial strategy.

We have heard many passionate voices from both sides of the House today. The House can unite in support of the excellence of our universities and our research, but the Government are not willing simply to celebrate the excellence already achieved—we want it to continue and to build on it further. Our reforms will create a level playing field for new providers and increase competition in the system. We will encourage innovation in the higher education sector, transform the sector’s ability to respond to economic demands and the rapidly changing graduate employment landscape, and ensure that we remain attractive internationally for decades to come. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 294, Noes 258.

Division No. 47] [6.59 pm

AYES

Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Akins, Victoria
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cameron, rh Mr David
Carman, Neil
Carling, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, David T. C. Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davey, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Downing, Oliver
Doyly-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evwemwe, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garner, rh Sir Edward
Garner, Mark
HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH BILL

(PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Higher Education and Research Bill:

Committal

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 13 October 2016.

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

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

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

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

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

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further messages from the Lords) may be programmed.—(Christopher Pincher.)

Question agreed to.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH BILL

(MONEY)

Queen's Recommendation signified.

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

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

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

Question agreed to.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Higher Education and Research Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the charging of fees payable by registered higher education providers and other institutions under the Act; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(Christopher Pincher.)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

ENTERPRISE

That the draft Pubs Code (Fees, Costs and Financial Penalties) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 13 June, be approved.

CRIMINAL LAW

That the draft Criminal Justice Act 1988 (Offensive Weapons) (Amendment) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 14 June, be approved.

CLIMATE CHANGE

That the draft Carbon Budget Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 30 June, be approved.—(Christopher Pincher.)

Question agreed to.

CLIMATE CHANGE

That the draft Climate Change Act 2008 (Credit Limit) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 30 June, be approved.—(Christopher Pincher.)

Question put.

The Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until 20 July.

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Warm Home Discount (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 4 July, be approved.—(Christopher Pincher.)

Question agreed to.

Mr Speaker: Order. I appeal to Members who are leaving the Chamber to do so quickly and quietly, in the manner of the hon. Member for Kensington (Victoria Borwick), who is giving a fine example of seemingly conduct to colleagues.

Cockling: Dee Estuary

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

7.15 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Cockling in the Dee estuary is an industry that makes an important contribution to the local economy. Natural Resources Wales issues 53 full licences each year for the cockle fishery on the Dee. Last year 250 tonnes of cockles were landed there, producing a value of half a million pounds. The value of United Kingdom exports as a whole to other European Union countries was £4.2 million in 2015, with most of the exports going to the Netherlands and France. It is therefore important for us to protect the industry and the livelihoods that depend on it.

For the past year, my office has been in contact with local cocklers who have been hugely concerned about what has been taking place between Natural Resources Wales and the Environment Agency in England. I held a meeting with both organisations in my constituency office, at which it was agreed that the Environment Agency would be the first port of call for the cocklers on the English side of the river; and that it would raise the cocklers’ concerns with Natural Resources Wales. This is a question of democratic accountability, and the process governing responsibility for managing the cockle beds of the River Dee raises important issues.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned the 53 licences. Many people worked those beds for years, as did their fathers and grandfathers before them, and were not given licences, unlike many others who had not worked the beds before.

Margaret Greenwood: That is an interesting point. I certainly know that a number of families in my constituency have been involved in cockling for a great many years.

My constituents feel that the Environment Agency is not representing them adequately, and that, as Natural Resources Wales is an agency of the Welsh Administration, its responsibility is obviously to people in Wales rather than those in England. They have spent months making requests for access to the accounts showing the fishery costs, which have been released in a piecemeal fashion. They have made repeated requests to see the full accounts, but have been provided with only a summary, which has led them to conclude that the fishery is not being managed properly.

My constituents believe that they are being overcharged for their licences because Natural Resources Wales is not acting in a cost-conscious or effective way. They are concerned about the lack of scrutiny of NRW by the Environment Agency and the lack of attendance by EA representatives at meetings, and that is clearly an issue. After submitting numerous freedom of information requests, they were given sight of a document: references from the minutes and papers of the partnership board meetings to Dee Services and transfer of functions. The Partnership Board executive summary of 6 October 2015 states:

"NRW are under pressure from fishermen (who fish the Dee River Cockle Beds), for a meeting. NRW would like EA representation at this meeting but local EA staff are unwilling.”
The Environment Agency apparently pays £18,000 a year to Natural Resources Wales to manage the cockle fishery, but, according to my constituents, that figure never appeared in the accounts before 2015. I should like the Minister to tell me exactly how much the Environment Agency has paid Natural Resources Wales in each year since 2012, and how much scrutiny the Environment Agency is giving to how the money is being spent. The lack of oversight of the way in which money is spent is of real concern.

Last year I asked the Minister what enforcement measures the Department had undertaken in relation to illegal cockling on the River Dee, how many prosecutions for illegal cockling had been brought in each year since 2010, and how many prosecutions had been successful. The Minister replied:

“All cockle fisheries within the Dee Estuary are controlled via the Dee Estuary Cockle Fishery Order 2008. Enforcement of the Order is a matter for Natural Resources Wales (NRW) as grantee of the Order.

Defra does not have information pertaining to the specific enforcement measures taken by NRW on illegal fishing occurring within this fishery.”

My follow-up question is this: why does Defra not have that information? It is paying NRW to manage the fishery, so it should have some interest in how the money is being spent.

More importantly, not only are my constituents paying for bailiff activities via their licence fee, they have also been told that it will pay towards unsuccessful prosecutions. I have asked the Minister how much the Department has spent on the management and enforcement of cockling rights in each year since 2010 and what information the Department holds on equivalent spending by the Welsh Government. The Minister’s response was to state:

“DEFRA does not hold this information.”

Why does it not hold this information? Last year the cockle beds were closed for quite some time, so I ask the Minister what discussions have taken place with the Welsh Government on, first, the management of fish, mussels, cockles and other seafood stocks in the river estuary; secondly the reasons for the closure of the cockle beds in the estuary; and, thirdly, the projected date for the reopening of the cockle beds?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The cockle industry is also important in my constituency. With advances in technology and environmental science there is great potential, but does the hon. Lady agree that ensuring that the jobs of local fishermen continue must be the priority for future legislation?

Margaret Greenwood: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and he makes a good point: it absolutely is important that we protect the jobs of those currently engaged in the industry, as they have been for generations.

To return to the Minister’s response, he stated:

“Fisheries is a devolved matter, and the Dee Estuary is a cross border fishery which is managed by the Welsh Government and Natural Resources for Wales for the Welsh part of the estuary. For the English part of the estuary, fisheries management is covered by my Department, the Environment Agency, the Marine Management Organisation, and the North West Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority.

However, Natural Resources for Wales (NRW) has responsibility for managing the cockle fishery in the Dee Estuary (on both the Welsh and English sides) as grantee of the Dee Estuary Cockle Fishery Order 2008. NRW has taken the decision to not open the fishery this year due to insufficient stocks. It has suggested that it may be opened in July 2016 should sufficient stock be available. I have not had any direct dealings with counterparts in Wales within the Dee Estuary fisheries management context or specifically in relation to the closure of the cockle beds.”

Does the Minister believe it is fair for NRW to charge cocklers the full licence fee for a season when that season amounts to only a few days? Cocklers are not doing this as a hobby; this is their livelihood, and if they are unable to access the beds they have no income. The cocklers are concerned that under the bird food modelling system used by NRW, a closed season will become the norm but they will still be expected to pay for a full licence and eventually be driven out of business by this cost.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know that on my side of the River Dee Welsh cockle fishermen who live in my constituency face the same pressures. I have written to Natural Resources Wales about the issue but have not had satisfaction either, so she has my full support in asking for rebates on the full price of the fee for seasonal work.

Margaret Greenwood: My right hon. Friend makes a good point: this issue affects fishermen on both sides of the estuary.

I remind the Minister of his own words in relation to farming. He said that:

“Farming has always been a risky business because of the weather and price volatility. Farmers want to earn their profit from the market but they need a helping hand when things go wrong.”

Are the River Dee cocklers any different? Figures provided to my constituents show that costs for managing the fishery have escalated since 2012 and staff time attributed to the cockle fishery has gone up. I ask the Minister to get the breakdown of what staff time is being allocated, for example, for administration and the cost of bailiffs. I also ask the Minister to look into why, when the fishery was closed for the majority of last season, figures obtained by my constituents show that £87,000 was allocated for staff time? Who is doing what, and why is the Environment Agency not providing any scrutiny of this figure?

Last year I asked the Minister how much revenue had been raised from licence fees for cockling in the River Dee estuary in each year since 2010 and the figures showed a big leap from 2012-13. In 2010 £51,584 was raised, in 2011 it was £52,576, in 2012 it was £52,576, and then in 2013 it increased to £68,900, and remained this figure in 2014. Will the Minister clarify whether this increase was due to a rise in the number of people using the fishery or to an increase in license fee? I would also like to know whether it is the intention of the fishery to become “self-sustaining” at any point as this could be achieved only either by massively increasing the licence fee, which would merely drive people out of business, or by increasing the number of licences, which, again, would drive people out of business and cause considerable environmental problems. The lack of financial transparency
must be addressed. My constituents have repeatedly asked Natural Resources Wales questions about its spending and charges, but they feel that it has failed to answer them adequately. Apparently, NRW has indicated that a financial manager would address those points, but that has not been forthcoming so I therefore put these questions to the Minister.

According to my constituents, the fishery’s financial records are not adequate and contain numerous omissions and expenses that do not seem credible to my constituents, such as £20,000 running costs for an amphibious vehicle that was supposedly used only for cockle survey work, which would have amounted to just a few days each year. What work was that vehicle carrying out?

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that all accounts from NRW and the Environment Agency on the Dee estuary and other cockle beds should be fully published and readily available? People should not have to make freedom of information requests so that we can all see exactly what is going on.

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point on behalf of Welsh and English cocklers. My constituents have raised pertinent questions, and they have every right to ask them and to be provided with answers if they feel that questions have not yet been responded to, or avoided altogether. They also ask for the necessary support from the Environment Agency, which again they feel has not been forthcoming.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): My south-Wales constituency has—or had—a great cockle industry in the Burry estuary. The constant complaint from cocklers at the moment is that although the estuary is badly managed by Natural Resources Wales, which is part of the Welsh Government, they still have to pay full licence fees. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is about time that Natural Resources Wales—problems that the Environment Agency has been aware of for some time, but is seemingly unwilling or unable to act on. It was therefore remarkable that in the latter part of 2015 the Environment Agency proposed a new regulatory order to reflect current management arrangements, and that Natural Resources Wales take over sole responsibility for the Dee. It seems from that proposal that there has been no acknowledgement of our constituents’ genuine concerns about the way the arrangement is currently working. Furthermore, if a regulatory order is required, are current arrangements operating without lawful authority because they have not yet been the subject of such an order?

The issue of accountability has come to a head because of the implementation by Natural Resources Wales of what is known as the bird food model for determining quotas, which was imposed on the estuary without consultation. That represents a departure from previous systems, and has put the livelihoods of many fishermen in jeopardy. There appears to be no proper mechanism for my constituents to challenge this decision, which they regard as a substantial departure from the management plan agreed under the regulating order of 2008. It will not be possible in the time available tonight to dissect the issues that my constituents have with the model, save to say that they very much doubt that they will be able to earn a living under it, and that it is a model that is not being adopted anywhere else in England.

Given that this represents such a substantial departure from the previous practice, I have to ask whether the decision to proceed with this model has been authorised in accordance with the law. Paragraph 3 of the original regulating order gives the Environment Agency the right “to impose restrictions on, and make regulations respecting, the dredging, fishing for or taking of cockles within the limits of the fishery.”

Hon. Members will note that the regulation refers to the Environment Agency, not Natural Resources Wales, hence my question about NRW’s capacity to make these changes. I hope that the Minister will be able to answer these questions satisfactorily tonight.

I should make it clear that before we called for this debate our constituents had been trying to resolve these issues through various channels, as my hon. Friend has...
described. My constituents have also tried to address the issues through the parliamentary ombudsman in England, who said the following:

“Unfortunately, we cannot look at your complaint about the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs because your complaint relates to the management of the cockle beds on the River Dee Estuary which is the responsibility of Natural Resources Wales. As your complaint is about restrictions placed on cockle fishing on the River Dee by Natural Resources Wales we believe that the organisation responsible for responding to your complaint is Natural Resources Wales.”

So off we went to the ombudsman for Wales. What did he say? Well, he noted with characteristic understatement that the new bird food model had

“had an effect on your capability to maintain a sustainable income”.

He went on to say that he was not suggesting that the use of the bird food model had not had a major impact, and that while he felt that there could have been consultation on the new model used by Natural Resources Wales, he could not look into the actual methodology used. He made a recommendation that there should be consultation if the model were due to change again, but a consultation in the future will be no good if the fisherman have already gone out of business by that point. This is the nub of the issue. My constituents have had a system imposed on them without consultation. It is entirely unfit for purpose and it is destroying their livelihoods, yet there seems to be no legitimate route through which they can raise their concerns about it. Where is the accountability in this situation?

Various other issues raised with the Welsh ombudsman were not dealt with on the basis they were not part of his jurisdiction and would have to go back to the parliamentary ombudsman in England. We also raised questions about the running costs, and were referred to the Wales Audit Office. I agree with the point that was made earlier: we should not have to chase around various organisations to get answers to these questions. The details and facts should be readily available for anyone to see. Does this not sum up the lack of clarity and accountability in the arrangements? Why should anyone to see. Does this not sum up the lack of clarity and accountability in the arrangements? Why should

7.34 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) on securing this debate and the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). Both have been heavily involved in trying to raise their constituents’ concerns.

The cockle fishery within the Dee estuary is managed through the Dee Estuary Cockle Fishery Order 2008, a regulating order giving exclusive rights to manage the fishery resource. In 2004, the Environment Agency made an application under the Sea Fisheries (Shellfish) Act 1967 to the Secretary of State and Welsh Ministers for a regulating order in respect of cockles in the Dee estuary to grant them a right of regulating a fishery for 20 years. As the fishery straddles the border between England and Wales, the application was progressed jointly by the Secretary of State and Welsh Ministers, and a single order was made for the designated area.

The 2008 order was created to enable the Environment Agency to carry into effect and enforce regulations and restrictions relating to the dredging of, fishing for and taking of cockles within a designated area of the Dee estuary. The order allowed the Environment Agency to manage and conserve the wild fishery by the use of licences to control the number of people who fish there and make regulations and levy tolls for the benefit of the fishery. Unlicensed persons are excluded from the regulated area except for individuals taking no more than 5 kg of cockles daily by hand for personal consumption. That is similar to how inshore fisheries and conservation authorities would manage cockle fisheries in their waters. For example, the North Western Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority would manage its cockle beds via a byelaw, with permit holders fishing only during an open season based on the IFCA’s stock assessments.

Natural Resources Wales took on the functions of the Environment Agency Wales in 2013, including the regulatory responsibility for the 2008 order. NRW currently acts on behalf of the Environment Agency to deliver their statutory functions for the English side of the 2008 order. While NRW and the Environment Agency are joint grantees of the 2008 order, NRW manages all
operational and management aspects of the order. That arrangement is enshrined in a service level agreement between NRW and the Environment Agency.

Before the 2008 order, the cockle fishery operated on a boom-and-bust cycle, with the beds often shut for a few years owing to very low cockle stocks. Once stocks had built up, the beds would open, but that would often result in hundreds of cocklers operating on the beds, resulting in stocks sometimes being cleared out quickly—within days or weeks—and consequently the beds being closed for several more years in some cases. From 1996, the beds were closed except for brief periods in 1997, the years 2001 through to 2003, and 2005. Since the introduction of the 2008 order, the beds have opened every year and have provided up to six months’ lucrative employment for 53 licenced cocklers. Additionally, during a bumber year, the fishery could be opened to a number of short-term non-renewable licence holders issued on a points system, using the NRW stock assessment to estimate the total allowable catch.

NRW estimates that licensees can earn somewhere in the region of £20,000 to £40,000 during a six-month season, depending on variables such as the cost per kilo of cockles. In 2013, 545 tonnes of cockles were landed and the fishery was worth an estimated £650,000, and 2014 was a bumper year with approximately 1,500 tonnes landed, giving an estimated value of £1.5 million. The cockling season was shorter in 2015 with just 250 tonnes of cockles landed, giving a value of £500,000. The amount of cockles landed and their value therefore varies from year to year.

The cockle season usually opens in July for six months and is subject to harvest limits derived from stock assessments that take place between April and July. Carrying out those stock assessments is one of the key costs covered by the licence. In 2015, early concerns over stock levels meant that the fishery was not opened until 21 September, but NRW reduced its annual licence fee in recognition. This year, the Dee estuary cockle beds opened on 1 July.

Fifteen licence holders are located in England and the remaining 38 in Wales. Many of the English licence holders have expressed concerns about the management of the fishery, which resulted in a letter of complaint to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales about NRW earlier this year. It does, however, make sense for a single body to be responsible for the management of the Dee cockle fishery. It is not practical for the estuary to be divided in half between English and Welsh authorities, as the England-Wales boundary runs through the middle of some of the beds and cockle stocks move around the estuary. That means that in some years the English beds are heavily stocked and Welsh beds have no stocks, and vice-versa. Performing surveys, liaising with cocklers and carrying out enforcement would all be more complicated and less efficient if two management bodies were involved.

Following the complaint about the NRW to the ombudsman regarding the management of the fishery, its resulting decision, given in May, was that the complaint should not be investigated. I do believe, however, that there must be a good level of quality consultation and dialog between the NRW and those affected by its management decisions. I understand that there is a Dee Estuary Sea Fisheries Liaison Group, which meets regularly and includes both cocklers and the NRW. I am aware that the most recent meetings of this group were held on 12 May and 17 June, and that an annual general meeting of licence holders was held on 23 June, with five attendees from interested parties. I am unaware of any contentious issues being raised at this AGM.

The hon. Member for Wirral West raised the issue of EA attendance. During the past year or so, the EA has increased its frequency of attendance at these meetings. Following today’s debate, and the points she and the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston both made, my officials will reconfirm to the agency my belief that it should attend all these meetings in future, in order to represent the views of their constituents. I also understand that they met the EA in January 2016, together with local licence holders. The licence holders were given contact details of EA staff who could assist should they have concerns, and the EA has said, when I made inquiries, that it has not received any concerns to date but it stands ready to assist should concerns be raised directly with it.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of licences and the transparency of licence fees, and I should point out that that was looked at by the ombudsman. To clarify the position, the 53 licensees pay an annual fee to the NRW, which is currently set at £1,500. In the previous three years, it had been set at £1,300, but it was reduced in 2015-16, in part owing to the season being shorter than usual. I am told that in 2015-16 the fishery cost the NRW more than £100,000 to regulate, with the cost primarily being made up of salary costs for liaison, surveys and enforcement. There are also some capital costs associated with equipment, hire of boats and so on. In 2015-16, the licence fee brought in £63,000, because of the reduction, and the EA therefore contributed the shortfall of £18,000—an additional £20,000 was made up in grants from NRW. So there is a shortfall, but there is transparency on the costs of the fishery.

The hon. Lady also asked how the licence fee is calculated, and I have been given a wonderful formula:

\[ \frac{A \times B}{N} \]

A is the annual number of working days on survey, enforcement or administration, B is the staff cost per working day and N is the number of licences. So a transparent formula is used, and I have been given the figures that she requested. Secondly, she made a point about prosecutions for illegal cockling. Although that is a responsibility of the NRW and the Welsh Government, I can confirm that at the end of last year I had a conversation with Carl Sargeant, the then fisheries Minister in the Welsh Government. He discussed his concerns about enforcement on this fishery and checked whether they have concerns, and the EA has said, when I made inquiries, that it has not received any concerns to date but it stands ready to assist should concerns be raised directly with it.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the changes that were made to the bird food model. I am told that two different approaches have been taken. Previously, the West model was used, under which some 4,500 tonnes of cockles had been set aside, particularly for oystercatchers, whereas under the new Stillman model, which was introduced, that figure went up to 6,900 tonnes. There are also some advantages to that model, as the West model would not allow any exploitation of the fishery unless there were at least 100 cockles per square metre.
In conclusion, hon. Members have made some important points, and I hope I have been able to reassure them that we take this issue seriously. I have asked the EA to attend all future meetings, and I hope that this clarifies some of the points that they have requested.

Question put and agreed to.

7.45 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 20 July 2016

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

North-south Electricity Interconnector

1. David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): What discussions he has had with System Operator Northern Ireland on the completion of the north-south electricity interconnector.

James Brokenshire: Let me say at the outset what a privilege it is to have been appointed as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and I pay tribute to the work of my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers). She played a very important role and made a significant contribution, and I, for one, fully recognise that. I look forward to working with right hon. and hon. Members across the House to maintain that approach of continued political stability, greater economic prosperity, and safety and security, as part of a bright positive future for Northern Ireland.

I understand that the previous Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), met EirGrid, the electricity system operator across the island of Ireland, to discuss the proposals for a new interconnector. I hope that proposals to deliver a stronger, more secure and more competitive network in Northern Ireland can be progressed quickly.

David Simpson: May I start by welcoming the Secretary of State to his new position and welcoming all his colleagues? I look forward to working with them over the coming months. He will know the benefits that the interconnector would bring, not only to Northern Ireland, but to the Republic of Ireland. Our understanding is that Sinn Féin is one of the biggest objectors to this. Does he agree that that shows its lack of understanding of simple economics?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for warmly welcoming me to my post, and I felt this in a positive way when I was in Belfast on Monday. He raises the issue of the interconnector, as he has done on a number of occasions. This is being considered by the Northern Ireland Planning Appeals Commission—it is a decision for the Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive—but I reiterate that given the significant potential to help to reduce energy costs for Northern Ireland businesses, I would hope to see the project move forward as quickly as possible.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): I welcome the Secretary of State to his new position and his very able partner, the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Keighley (Kris Hopkins), who has been an outstanding Member of this House. Has the Secretary of State had an opportunity, at this early stage, to make an assessment of the long-term future of the all-Ireland energy market in the light of the referendum result? Will the result alter that market in any way?

James Brokenshire: Again, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his welcome. I certainly recognise the importance of the all-Ireland arrangements for electricity and for gas. In the continued negotiations and discussions on Northern Ireland and the UK being outside the European Union, that will be a core part of the issues we will be taking forward.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I, too, congratulate the Secretary of State and his team on their appointments, and thank the previous team for all the work they did for Northern Ireland. On an alternative electricity supply and the renewable heat initiative, the Northern Ireland Audit Office has told us that it may cost our block grant £140 million. Will the Secretary of State ensure that there is an investigation as to what has happened?

James Brokenshire: Coming into this role, I recognise the issue of costs for electricity and power more generally, and its importance in the context of the Northern Ireland economy. Indeed, this is why I made the points and its importance in the context of the Northern Ireland economy. On an alternative electricity supply and the renewable heat initiative, the Northern Ireland Audit Office has told us that it may cost our block grant £140 million. Will the Secretary of State ensure that there is an investigation as to what has happened?

James Brokenshire: Again, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his welcome. I certainly recognise the importance of the all-Ireland arrangements for electricity and for gas. In the continued negotiations and discussions on Northern Ireland and the UK being outside the European Union, that will be a core part of the issues we will be taking forward.

Economic Development

2. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on economic development in Northern Ireland. [905909]

5. Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on economic development in Northern Ireland. [905912]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): I am determined to build on the progress this Government have made in delivering peace and prosperity to Northern Ireland. We have already taken significant steps to back businesses across the UK, including reducing corporation tax and bringing the Exporting is GREAT campaign to Northern Ireland in May.

Bob Blackman: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment and I join in the remarks made about his predecessor. Will he continue the Government’s work to ensure that the private sector continues to grow? In his discussions with the Northern Ireland
Executive, will he emphasise the need to improve private sector investment, so that more jobs are created in Northern Ireland and more people can gain from prosperity?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the creation of jobs and prosperity. I am sure that he welcomes today’s figures, which show further falls in unemployment and the claimant count in Northern Ireland, and increased employment, underlining the important aspects that he highlights. Yes, I will certainly be discussing with the Executive the role that I have to play with regard to investment and how we promote further jobs, growth and opportunity.

Fiona Bruce: Will the Secretary of State reaffirm the Government’s commitment to the devolution of corporation tax powers as set out in the Stormont House agreement? Does he agree that a vital part of that is that the Executive demonstrate that their finances are on a stable and long-term footing?

James Brokenshire: We do want the UK to stand out as a low-tax destination for business. We have already cut the rate of corporation tax from 28% to 20%, and we will cut it further. My hon. Friend makes the point about the devolution of corporation tax powers. They are subject to conditions around fiscal discipline and financial stability. We look forward to working with the Executive to achieve that and to see that that further devolution takes place.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May I add my congratulations to the Secretary of State and to his ministerial colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Keighley (Kris Hopkins), on their new positions? I look forward to working constructively with the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Office in the coming days. May I also pay tribute to the outgoing Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Chippenham Barnet (Mrs Villiers), who played an enormously positive and constructive role in Northern Ireland, and was instrumental in bringing about the “Fresh Start” and Stormont House agreements? We owe an enormous debt of gratitude to her.

I thank the Secretary of State for the discussions that he has already had with some of us and with the First Minister and the Executive Office. Can he spell out for the benefit of the House once again what he has already said publicly in Northern Ireland, which is why there is no question of a border poll in Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his warm welcome and indeed for the very warm comments that he made about my predecessor, which I wholly endorse. I have been quite straightforward about this issue of the border poll. The conditions are set out very clearly in relation to the Belfast agreement, and I have been very clear that those conditions have not been met.

Mr Dodds: The reason why they have not been met is that the overwhelming majority of people in both communities in Northern Ireland want to remain part of the United Kingdom. Does the Secretary of State recognise the irony and the illogicality of those who are talking so much doom and gloom about Northern Ireland and the UK post the Brexit referendum, when their main policy—their main raison d’être—is to drag us out of the United Kingdom, which would be the most financially catastrophic and politically demoralising thing that is possible to imagine?

James Brokenshire: Let me underline the comments made by the Prime Minister about the very special bond that binds the peoples and nations of the United Kingdom—England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It is a very simple message. Now is the time to come together and to work together to secure that bright positive future for Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom outside the European Union.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): On behalf of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, may I welcome the new ministerial team and indeed the shadow Secretary of State to their positions? I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), who was the former Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and particularly to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers), who really has carried out an enormous amount of work in Northern Ireland.

May I ask the Secretary of State about south-east England airport connectivity, which is very important to the economy of Northern Ireland? Could he have a word with his Cabinet colleagues and speed up the decision on airport capacity in the south-east of England?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his welcome. Indeed, I very much look forward to working with the Select Committee. I note that he is tempting me into a broader area of policy in relation to airport capacity. He will know that the previous Transport Secretary made a clear statement on the timing of that, and, obviously, the matter requires further consideration.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): May I add my congratulations to the Secretary of State and to the Under-Secretary of State on their appointments? Has the Secretary of State and his officials, working with Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive, made any calculation of the economic damage to Northern Ireland as a result of the vote to leave the European Union when the people voted to remain?

James Brokenshire: I certainly recognise that there were differences of view on the EU referendum, as there were across the rest of the United Kingdom. Our focus now needs to be on what Northern Ireland can be, and on what we can achieve in terms of trade, jobs and new opportunities. It is precisely that positive agenda that I intend to take forward.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I welcome the new Secretary of State to his position, and also commend the former Secretary of State for her hard work on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland. Austerity has hit all of us hard, but Northern Ireland has special circumstances which make the impact even harder. Will the Government now consider reversing the austerity measures so that Northern Ireland’s economy can recover from the damage done?
James Brokenshire: I thank the hon. Lady for her warm words of welcome. Again, I underline the figures that we have seen today, showing further falls in unemployment. It is right that we have a strong, stable economy, and that we continue to look outwards. I point the hon. Lady to the fact that the total value of goods exported from Northern Ireland over the past year has increased by 9%—a figure which outperforms the rest of the UK.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I, too, welcome the new Secretary of State and his Minister to their posts, and assure him that we on the Labour Benches will do everything we can to carry on the bipartisan approach, doing the best we can for the people of Northern Ireland. I also thank my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker). Everyone I have met in Northern Ireland asked me to thank him for his work.

For years the rebalancing of the Northern Ireland economy has been promoted by the Government, and intrinsic to this has been a push to reduce corporation tax, but in recent discussions that I have had with businesses in Northern Ireland, they have told me that it is much more important to address the huge skills gap in Northern Ireland, where far too many young people are leaving school unable to read and write properly. What will the Secretary of State do to help the people of Northern Ireland to bridge that gap?

Mr Speaker: We need great brevity as there are a lot of questions to reach.

James Brokenshire: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his warm welcome. I certainly want to continue the bipartisan relationship. He highlights the issue of skills. I absolutely recognise that and will work with the Northern Ireland Executive on apprenticeships and on creating jobs and opportunities for young people, to give them the best possible advantages.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

Mr Anderson: May I suggest to the Secretary of State that for his summer reading this month, he looks into a number of reports—the report recently produced by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on the referendum, the report from the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association on its economic plan, and crucially the report from the Economic and Social Research Institute that was produced for the Irish Government in November last year to show that the trade deficit between the north and the south following Brexit could fall by at least 20%. Will he come back to the House in the autumn and tell us why his predecessor and the Northern Ireland Office were so badly prepared for Brexit?

James Brokenshire: I am always grateful for recommendations for summer reading and I will add the hon. Gentleman’s suggestions to my list. It is important to recognise that exports from Northern Ireland to the United States increased by more than 80%, and also increased to Canada and Germany. We will certainly promote that positive outlook for Northern Ireland.

Cross-border Crime

3. Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to reduce cross-border crime in Northern Ireland. [905910]

8. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to reduce cross-border crime in Northern Ireland. [905915]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): The joint agency task force, created under the “Fresh Start” agreement, is tackling cross-border crime in Northern Ireland. The task force has completed a strategic assessment to identify priorities and is co-ordinating joint law enforcement operations against the criminals involved.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his work. Friend for welcoming the report of the joint agency task force. Does he welcome the success of the joint operations already carried out?

James Brokenshire: Yes, I certainly do. It is important that we maintain the focus on combating organised crime and on responding implacably to paramilitarism. I do recognise the successes to date.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I, too, congratulate the Secretary of State on his appointment. I am sure his previous experience as Security Minister will stand him in good stead. Does he agree that in this pending Brexit world, closer co-operation between the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Garda Siochana is more important than ever? What plans does he have to make that happen?

James Brokenshire: Entirely endorse my hon. Friend’s comments on the need for good cross-border working relationships between the PSNI and Garda Siochana. I have already had a conversation with Frances Fitzgerald, the Irish Justice Minister, to underline that. We have very good relationships and I want to see them continue.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his post. Does he agree that tackling cross-border crime involves tackling paramilitarism? Has he had a chance to look at the report published by Stormont yesterday with respect to action, in particular, to consider what may be done about decommissioning residual paramilitary weapons? How is that going to happen?

James Brokenshire: At the outset, may I commend the hon. Gentleman for his work? He and I have obviously had a number of discussions on issues of crime and security over many, many years. I welcome the publication of the Northern Ireland Executive’s action plan on tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime. This represents another significant milestone in terms of the commitment set out in the “Fresh Start” agreement. It provides a positive basis on which we can now move forward, and I look forward to the more detailed action plan, which will be published shortly.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): May I warmly associate myself with the comments made by so many other people? I note that this is now my sixth opposite number facing me—it is almost as if I am being used as a training aid for young, thrusting Tories.
Last week, when my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) and I met Chief Constable George Hamilton, he expressed his grave concern about the implications for the European arrest warrant post-Brexit and the desire not to go back to the old extradition methods. What assurance can the Secretary of State give us that the European arrest warrant can survive post-Brexit?

James Brokenshire: I am always grateful to continue the interplay between myself and the hon. Gentleman in so many different ways. He makes a serious and important point about the European arrest warrant—something I was very conscious of in my previous role at the Home Office. I see this as a core part of the negotiations that the Home Secretary and others will be taking forward, recognising the huge benefit to the UK—and to Northern Ireland—of having those extradition arrangements under the European arrest warrant.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): In respect of paramilitary groups that are engaged in cross-border organised crime as well, what steps is my right hon. Friend taking to identify and deal with these individuals specifically?

James Brokenshire: I have already highlighted the work of the joint agency taskforce. It is a question of all the law enforcement agencies working together to identify the organised criminal groups. That is precisely the activity that is intended. Equally, I recognise the work that the National Crime Agency does more broadly, which absolutely helps to support this.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Northern Ireland recently, incidents have increased and severe violence has been used at cross-border posts. Organised crime gangs and criminal networks outside of the islands are involved. Does the Minister recognise that the increase in crime needs to be top of the agenda in any forthcoming Brexit talks?

James Brokenshire: As I have already indicated, I do see the whole issue of safety and security as a priority. That requires good working relationships between the PSNI and the Garda Síochána. I had a meeting with Deputy Chief Constable Drew Harris in Belfast earlier this week to discuss those very issues, and this certainly is a matter that I regard as a priority in moving forward with my role.

Security Situation: Trade

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on trade of the security situation in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Kris Hopkins): May I begin by recognising the enormous contribution of my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace)? I wish him well in his new role. I am determined to build on the progress this Government have made in delivering peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland. This Government have already taken bold steps to back businesses across the UK, including reducing corporation tax and bringing the Exporting is GREAT campaign to Northern Ireland.

Ian Paisley: I, too, welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box—he was an excellent member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. On trade and crime, he will know that there has been a hangover of paramilitary crime affecting trade along the border. There has been a complete delay in dealing with fuel fraud. Will he agree to meet me and the hon. Members for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) and for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), and to bring along Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs officials to boot, to allow us to discuss this issue and resolve it once and for all?

Kris Hopkins: I would be absolutely delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman and other Members from both sides of the House. May I just put on record my respect for the fact that he has managed to secure a £5 million trust for local employers? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. We are discussing very serious matters, including the security of Northern Ireland, to which exchange the hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), who has a related question, might wish to contribute now.

Mr Speaker: Order. We are discussing very serious matters, including the security of Northern Ireland, to which exchange the hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), who has a related question, might wish to contribute now.

Jack Lopresti: Following the recent threat increase, will my hon. Friend assure the House that he remains absolutely committed to ensuring that our security agencies, police and others have the equipment to deal with any threats they might face?

Kris Hopkins: I reassure my hon. Friend. Friend that this Government have already increased PSNI funding by £160 million, with £25 million specifically to address paramilitary activity.

Electoral Offices

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): What the Government’s plans are for the future of electoral offices in Northern Ireland.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Kris Hopkins): The Government want to make sure that Northern Ireland voters can benefit from the introduction of digital registration. This new technology also provides an opportunity for the chief electoral officer to examine how electoral services can be delivered more effectively.

Tom Elliott: I, too, welcome the Minister and the Secretary of State to their place and thank the former team. Does the Minister accept that there may be some difficulties with online registration that are particular to Northern Ireland and not to other parts of the United Kingdom?

Kris Hopkins: The system has been working in the rest of the United Kingdom since 2014. A full public consultation on the reform proposals and models will start this autumn, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will make a full contribution to the process.
Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Mark Durkan (Foyle) must be heard on matters that pertain directly to his constituents.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I extend my courtesies to the new ministerial team.

Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that the concern is to avoid not just the creation of new border posts, but the unnecessary and unhelpful borderism that the separation of north and south—of non-EU and EU—would entail? The new Immigration Minister gave an example of borderism yesterday when he boasted of his pre-Brexit bout of borderism with the HGV levy on cross-border trucks.

James Brokenshire: I certainly recognise the various points the hon. Gentleman has made. Border issues are significant both for the movement of people and for goods and services, and that is intrinsic to the overall arrangements between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It is why I have made a very clear commitment in all my statements to ensuring that we do not return to the arrangements of the past, and that is precisely what will remain a priority for me in my role.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—Engagements

Q1. [905968] John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 20 July.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in welcoming today’s employment figures, which show employment at another record high, the lowest unemployment rate in over a decade and wages rising.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others, and in addition to my duties in this House I shall have further such meetings later today. This afternoon, I will travel to Berlin to meet Chancellor Merkel to discuss how we implement the decision that the British people took in the referendum, and I expect we will also cover a number of other pressing international issues. Tomorrow, I will visit Paris for similar discussions with President Hollande.

John Glen: I warmly welcome the Prime Minister to her place. Given her unwavering commitment to delivering economic stability and national security in our United Kingdom’s interest, does she welcome Monday’s emphatic vote in this House for the Trident successor programme, and will she ensure that economic stability and national security remain the guiding principles of her premiership?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. I join him in enthusiastically welcoming the vote taken in this House on Monday evening to renew our nuclear deterrent. I think that vote showed the commitment of this House: it showed that we have not only committed to our own national security, but considered the security of European and NATO allies. We can now get on with the essential job of renewing...
our nuclear deterrent. May I thank the 140 Labour Members of Parliament who put the national interest first and voted to renew the nuclear deterrent?

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): May I welcome the right hon. Lady to her first Prime Minister’s Question Time, and congratulate her on her appointment and on becoming the country’s second woman Prime Minister? I hope that she will agree with me that Prime Minister’s Question Time in this House should be an opportunity to debate seriously the issues that face our country and our place in the world.

On the steps of Downing Street, the Prime Minister talked very eloquently about “fighting…burning injustice”, yet her last act as Home Secretary was to shunt the Orgreave inquiry into the long grass. The Advocate General told the House of Lords:

“The IPCC told Home Office officials that if it announced any action to set up an inquiry or other investigation relating to Orgreave, it would have an impact on the Hillsborough investigation.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 13 July 2016; Vol. 774, c. 216.]

The Independent Police Complaints Commission disputes that account. I hope Parliament was not misled. Will the Prime Minister now proceed with a full public inquiry into the terrible events at Orgreave?

Jeremy Corbyn: That Labour Government put a decent homes standard in place in every part of this country. I am not sure that—[Interruption.] I am not sure that starter homes at £450,000 for young people earning 7% less than their parents’ generation represent a good prospect for people owning their own homes.

The Prime Minister is rightly concerned that:

“If you’re black, you’re treated more harshly…than if you’re white.”

Before appointing her new Foreign Secretary, did she discuss with him his description of black people as “piccaninnies” and ask why he had questioned the motives of US President Obama on the basis of his “part-Kenyan” heritage?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman started his question by making reference to the issue of starter homes and the upper limit in London of £450,000. I have sat on these Benches and heard him raise that with my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr Cameron) on a number of occasions when he was Prime Minister. Can I just explain this to the Leader of the Opposition? If he looks at house prices across the country, he will see that they vary. In Liverpool, the average house price is just over £116,000. In London, the average house price is just over £676,000. That is why we have a higher limit for starter homes in London. If he objects to that, he needs to tell his constituents why he is against their having opportunities to get on the housing ladder.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the remarks I made. It is correct that if you are black, you will be treated more harshly in the criminal justice system. That is exactly why, as Home Secretary, I dealt with the issue of stop and search. I was concerned to make sure that nobody should be stopped and searched on the streets of this country because of the colour of their skin. I did that as a Conservative; in 13 years, Labour did nothing on it.

Jeremy Corbyn: My question was actually about the language used by the Foreign Secretary.

Earlier this week, the new Chancellor abandoned the Government’s budget surplus target, which Labour has long called for. The Prime Minister’s Government are already missing their targets on debt, the deficit, the welfare cap and productivity. Six years of Government austerity have failed. The long-term economic plan is clearly dead. Is there a new one?

The Prime Minister: It is the long-term economic plan that has delivered the record level of employment that we see today. Perhaps I could put the right hon. Gentleman straight. We have not abandoned the intention to move to a surplus. What I have said is that we will not target that at the end of this Parliament. He uses the language of austerity; I call it living within our means.

Jeremy Corbyn: Jobless claims have risen for the fourth month in a row and welfare claims have risen as well. Austerity actually means people being poorer,
services being cut and local facilities being closed. In her speech on the steps of Downing Street the Prime Minister also addressed insecure workers, saying:

“You have a job but you don’t always have job security.”

Does that mean that those people who are worried about their future in work—[Interruption.] I am talking of the people who sent us here to serve them. Does that mean that she is proposing to scrap employment tribunal fees, repeal the Trade Union Act 2016 and ban zero-hours contracts, as more than a dozen European nations have done already? That would help to give greater job security to many very worried people in this country.

The Prime Minister: Again, I say to the right hon. Gentleman that yes, I said that on the steps of Downing Street, because it is very important that here in this House we consider not only what might be called the more obvious injustices, but life for those people who are in work and struggling to make ends meet. That is essential, and the Government have raised the threshold at which people start to pay income tax, for example. It is also about making sure that we have more well-paid jobs in this country, which the Government are also doing.

I am interested that the right hon. Gentleman referred to the situation of some workers who might have job insecurity and potentially unscrupulous bosses. I suspect that many Members on the Opposition Benches might be familiar with an unscrupulous boss—a boss who does not listen to his workers, a boss who requires some of his workers to double their workload and maybe even a boss who exploits the rules to further his own career. Remind him of anybody?

Jeremy Corbyn: We are sent here to represent people. Many people in this country are struggling with low wages and insecure jobs—[Hon. Members: “You!”] I know this is very funny for all the Conservative Members, but I do not suppose there are too many Conservative MPs who have to go to a food bank to supplement the food on their family’s table every week. We should reflect on that.

The Prime Minister highlighted the failures of her predecessor on social justice, home ownership, education and the cost of living. Some might say that, as a Cabinet predecessor on social justice, home ownership, education reflect on that.

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of her Government and of the Bundestag in having Scotland remain within the EU? Will she assure the Chancellor and other Heads of State and Government that we in Scotland will do everything—everything—that is necessary for us to remain in the EU?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has taken that line for some time—he took it with my predecessor—but I find it a little confusing, given that only two years ago in the Scottish referendum, the Scottish National party was campaigning for Scotland to leave the United Kingdom, which would have meant leaving the European Union.

Q6. [905975] Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): We all stand with the people of France, and particularly Nice, following the appalling terrorist act there last week. Will the Prime Minister update the House on how the security collaboration between our two countries can help to prevent such attacks in future, and will she reassure the French people that although we are leaving the European Union, the close links between our two countries will remain steadfast?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important topic, and as has been said in this House before, our thoughts are with all the people of France after the appalling attack that took place in Nice last week. We continue to work with the French authorities in the aftermath of that attack, and my hon. Friend is right to say that we must continue our security co-operation with France and other European countries. We will not be cowed by terrorists; we both face the same threats, and we need to work together to defeat those threats. I absolutely confirm that, yes, the United Kingdom will leave the European Union, but the United Kingdom is not leaving Europe and our co-operation will continue.

Q7. [905976] Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Extremism takes many forms, from the atrocity in Nice to the violent murder of Qandeel Baloch by her own brother in Pakistan. That murder was justified as an “honour killing”. There have been 11,000 incidents of self-styled honour crimes in the UK in the past five years. Does the Prime Minister agree that such crimes are in fact acts of terror, not honour? Will she therefore direct her new Government to choose to lead and end the use of the word “honour” to describe these vile acts in order to stop giving any legitimacy to the idea that women are the property of men?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue, one that I think resonates across the whole House. She is absolutely right: extremism does take many forms. That is why, in the Government’s counter-extremism strategy, we are looking very widely across the breadth of issues of extremism, including tackling the root causes of some practices within communities, such as so-called honour-based violence. I absolutely agree with her that there is absolutely no honour in so-called honour-based violence. It is violence and a criminal act, pure and simple.

Q3. [905971] Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Prime Minister to her first Prime Minister’s Question Time. Will she listen to the headteachers of the excellent primary schools in my constituency? They tell me that the recent unprecedented changes to primary education, including the new SATs, have led to negative impacts on children’s learning outcomes. Will she urge the new Secretary of State to take those concerns forward, listen and make useful changes?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her welcome. Getting education right is absolutely crucial if we are to ensure that people can take up the opportunities they deserve and have the aspiration to take up those opportunities. Obviously, my right hon. Friend the new Education Secretary will be looking across the board at the education provision that is in place. We have made some important changes already over the past six years that are improving the quality of education and mean that more children are receiving the quality of education they need. There is, of course, more for us to do and we will be looking to do that.

Q8. [905977] Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): In my constituency, aerospace is of vital importance, with Rolls-Royce employing more than 1,000 people at sites in Barnoldswick. Aerospace is important not just to Pendle, however, but to the whole UK economy, so will
the Prime Minister congratulate all the companies that attended the Farnborough airshow last week on the deals they signed, and does she agree that the nearly £100 billion of trade deals already done this year demonstrates that Britain is very much still open for business?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that Britain is open for business, and I know what an important role the aerospace industry plays in his constituency, as he pointed out with his reference to Rolls-Royce, and in constituencies across the country. I also know of the importance of the Farnborough airshow. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) was telling me last night what a great airshow it was. The Government committed at Farnborough to providing a new £365 million fund for research and development to ensure we retain our leading position in the sector. As my hon. Friend also said, a significant number of trade deals have already been signed, which shows that Britain is open for business. I would encourage other companies to go out there and get that business.

Q5. [905973] Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I, too, welcome the right hon. Lady to her place. Newcastle airport was voted “best in Britain” this week, but the good news that it is really waiting for is a decision on Heathrow expansion. The Prime Minister knows that Britain needs to be open for business, so will she do better than dithering Dave and give us a decision without delay?

The Prime Minister: I have fond memories of Newcastle airport, from the time when I stood in the North West Durham constituency some years ago and made quite good use of the airport. It has changed and expanded rather since then. Our position on Heathrow has not changed. Obviously, there was the Howard Davies review, and further work has been done on the question of air quality around the proposals put forward. The Cabinet and the Government will take a decision, in the proper way, in due course.

Q12. [905981] Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Based on an analysis of the crime survey for England and Wales by the Children’s Society, it is estimated that 113 16 and 17-year-old girls in my constituency experienced a sexual offence in the past year. Given the progress made in tackling child sexual exploitation in the last few years, will my right hon. Friend outline whether the Government have plans to strengthen the protection for this particular vulnerable age group?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. We have seen recently the appalling circumstances in Rotherham in relation to child sexual exploitation, but as she has shown, in every constituency in the country, young people are being subjected to sexual offences of various sorts. That is why, since Rotherham, the Government have been working with all the appropriate agencies to ensure we put greater support in place. We have provided an extra £7 million of funding to ensure that victims of sexual abuse receive the right support, launched the whistleblowing helpline to help authorities to spot patterns of failure, and made child sexual abuse and exploitation a national threat, meaning that police authorities have a duty to collaborate on this terrible crime. In the coming months, we will also be strengthening our arrangements. We are all appalled by child sexual abuse, and we need to carry on making sure that we eradicate it.

Q9. [905978] Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): In her first statement from the steps of Downing Street, the Prime Minister stated that she would lead a Government who would work for everyone. Since she became Prime Minister, I have tried unsuccessfully to get assurances on the continuation of the northern schools strategy and the £80 million set aside for it. Will she give me that commitment today so that children in Bradford and the north can have the same chances as those in London and the south?

The Prime Minister: It is important that we ensure that children across the country get the opportunities they deserve, and the quality of education they receive is an important part of that. The review launched in March by Sir Nick Weller will make recommendations to address this particular issue. I assure the hon. Gentleman that my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary will look carefully at the result of that review and, in due course, make clear the Government’s response to its recommendations.

Q13. [905982] Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): Growing up on a council estate, I found it tough coming out—as a Conservative. Difficult as it was, I understood then, as I do now, that it is only Conservative Governments that deliver real social mobility. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is the Government’s job to fight for such opportunities for the people of Britain, because the Labour party are too busy fighting each other?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend puts it very well. If we look at the Conservative Benches, we see, as he said, Conservative Members of Parliament who were brought up in council houses and Conservative MPs brought up by single parent families, while the chairman of the Conservative party is a former miner. It is this party that is looking at opportunity for all. I am certainly very clear that the Government I lead will be driven not by the interests of the privileged few, but by the interests of everyone in this country. We are not entrenching the advantages of the privileged few in terms of opportunity, but extending opportunity to all.

Q10. [905979] Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): Whatever one’s politics, one cannot help but be inspired by last week’s image of the female Prime Minister of the UK meeting the female First Minister of Scotland. It sends a message to girls everywhere that they can achieve anything they want and nothing should be off limits to them. Does the Prime Minister agree that to do this, girls and women should be able to live free from gender-based violence and domestic abuse, and will she commit to supporting the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) and ratify the Istanbul convention?

The Prime Minister: It is an important symbol for girls and young women when they can see women in positions such as Prime Minister and First Minister of
Scotland. I respect the First Minister; we had a very constructive first meeting. There were certain issues on which we disagree and will continue to disagree, but we will work practically and pragmatically together.

It is important to deal with the issues of gender violence and domestic violence against women and girls. That is why the Government have—I led this as Home Secretary—a strategy to deal with violence against women and girls, which is now being taken on by my right hon. Friend the new Home Secretary. We have a good record on what we have done, for example, putting into operation domestic violence protection orders and the new coercive control offence, but there is always more to do and we will be doing that.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her place, and if it is not too untoward to say, I declare it as game, set and match to her this afternoon. Last week, when I met local National Farmers Union representatives in North Dorset, they understood precisely what we were doing in delivering on Brexit, but were keen to ensure that the needs of agriculture and British farmers are front and centre in those discussions and that their interests are not neglected. May I invite my right hon. Friend to make that commitment today?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to make the commitment that, as we look at the position we will take in the negotiations for the UK to leave the European Union, we will consult widely. I recognise that agriculture is a sector that is particularly affected by Brexit, and I can assure my hon. Friend that we will consult and listen to the views of farmers and others involved in the food industry and agricultural sector.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on becoming Prime Minister, and gently remind her of the conversation we had a few weeks ago when I said she was going to come through the middle and trounce the men standing for that position. I was right. I also said I was going to put some money on her, but I never got round to it—unfortunately, because the odds were very good at the time.

May I ask the Prime Minister a serious question about the younger generation, the millennials? So many of them in our country believe that they are citizens of the United Kingdom, and that Department will need the expertise that will enable it to undertake the negotiations even in the present circumstances?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and I do indeed remember the conversation in which he said that I would, as he put it, “trounce the men”. I have to say, however, that the Conservative party came up with an all-woman shortlist, without being required to do so.

The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the younger generation. This is what I would say to them today. As I said a little earlier in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski), we are leaving the European Union, but we are not leaving Europe. Over the coming weeks and months, we will be setting out our negotiating position on the relationship with the European Union when we leave. I would also say to the young people that the hon. Gentleman talks about that we should not limit their opportunities and their horizons by just looking at Europe. This country will make a success of Brexit, because we will be out there in the world as an outward-looking, expansive country, with opportunities around the globe.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May I warmly welcome the Prime Minister to her post? Unlike dithering Barry, I did place a bet on her becoming the next leader of our party. I apologise for the fact that my phone was obviously turned off when she was calling me to invite me to join her Government.

The reason the people of Yorkshire voted overwhelmingly to leave the European Union was largely to do with immigration control. Can the Prime Minister reassure them that when we finally do leave the European Union, she will insist on keeping her original promise to bring the immigration figures down to the tens of thousands?

The Prime Minister: The vote that took place on 23 June sent a very clear message about immigration. It sent the clear message that people want control of free movement from the European Union, and that is precisely what we will ensure that we get in the negotiations that we will undertake. I also remain absolutely firm in my belief that we need to bring net migration down to sustainable levels, and the Government believe that that means tens of thousands. It will take some time to get there, but now, of course, there is the added aspect of the controls that we can bring in relation to people moving from the European Union.

Mr Speaker: Finally, I call Mr Tim Farron. [Interruption.]

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): You are all very, very kind.

May I, genuinely, warmly welcome the Prime Minister to her position? She has come a long way since we were on the hustings together in North West Durham, and she is no doubt reflecting on the fact that she is receiving more support in the Chamber than either of us received in Consett working men’s club.

There are reports today that the new Brexit unit will be hiring lawyers at a cost of £5,000 per head per day. May I ask whether the Prime Minister will be using the mythical £350 million to pay the legal fees, or is that still pencilled in for the NHS, as promised by her Cabinet colleagues who campaigned for Leave?

The Prime Minister: I think it absolutely right for us to create a new Department to focus on the work of negotiating the United Kingdom’s departure from the United Kingdom, and that Department will need the expertise that will enable it to undertake the negotiations.

I am very happy to remember the days that the hon. Gentleman and I spent campaigning in North West Durham at the time of a general election. Little did the voters of North West Durham know that the two unsuccessful candidates in that election would become leaders of two of the country’s political parties, although I would point out to the hon. Gentleman that my party is a little bit bigger than his.
Orgreave: Public Inquiry into Policing

12.39 pm

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab)/ Urgent Question: To ask the Home Secretary if she will clarify comments made last week in another place on calls for a public inquiry into policing at the Orgreave coking plant in 1984.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Last week my noble friend the Advocate General for Scotland answered an oral question asked by Lord Balfie of Dulwich on whether the Government had yet decided whether there would be an inquiry into police actions during the Orgreave miners’ clash in 1984. He explained that the previous Home Secretary had been considering the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign’s submission, and that the Independent Police Complaints Commission is working with the Crown Prosecution Service to assess whether material related to the policing of Orgreave is relevant to the Hillsborough criminal investigations with decisions yet to be made by them on whether any criminal proceedings will be brought as a result.

The Government take all allegations of police misconduct very seriously and the then Home Secretary considered the campaign’s analysis in detail. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that I have today written to the campaign secretary, Barbara Jackson, to say that I would be very happy to meet her and the campaign immediately after the summer recess. I would also be happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman to discuss this case as I know this is something that he feels very strongly about. This is one of the most important issues in my in-tray as a new Home Secretary, and I can assure him that I will be considering the facts very carefully over the summer. I hope to come to a decision as quickly as possible following that.

Andy Burnham: I promised the Hillsborough families the full truth about the 20-year cover-up. They will not have it until we also know what happened after Orgreave. A year ago the IPCC found senior officers gave untrue statements exaggerating violence from miners to distract from their own use of force, some would say brutality. So the force that would wrongly blame Liverpool supporters tried to do the same against the miners five years before. In response, the then Home Secretary promised to consider a public inquiry. That was welcome because the miners’ strike caused deep scars when, in the words of a former chief constable, the police were used as an “army of occupation”. The Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign has, as the Home Secretary said, submitted an application, but there was a somewhat unexpected announcement in another place last week that it would now be substantially delayed. The Advocate General’s exact words were:

“The IPCC told Home Office officials that if it announced any action to set up an inquiry or other investigation relating to Orgreave, it would have an impact on the Hillsborough investigation.” — [Official Report, House of Lords, 13 July 2016; Vol. 744, c.216].

However, the deputy chair of the IPCC says:

“I would like to clarify that the IPCC has not taken or offered any position on whether there should be a public inquiry...That is a decision that is entirely a matter for the Home Secretary.”

That is why I have brought the Home Secretary here today.

I welcome the Home Secretary’s offer to meet me, but might it not help to build the right climate if she today corrects the misleading impression given to Parliament that the IPCC had advised against the establishment of an inquiry at this time? Does she accept that there is no reason why ongoing investigations should delay an Orgreave inquiry, and that in similar situations it is commonplace for protections to be put in place to manage any risks? Can she see why the Government’s actions look like a Home Office manoeuvre to shunt a controversial issue into the long grass?

This, one of the final decisions of the former Home Secretary, was announced as she stood on the steps of Downing street promising to “fight injustice”. People may remember another Tory Prime Minister quoting St Francis of Assisi outside No. 10 and the subsequent gap that emerged between her fine words and her deeds. To ensure that history does not repeat itself, will the Home Secretary do the right thing? Will she restore the trust that has been damaged among people who have already waited more than 30 years for the truth and, today, order a full public inquiry into Orgreave?

Amber Rudd: The right hon. Gentleman will know that this Government have not been slow in looking at historical cases. There have been Labour Governments and there have been Conservative Governments since 1984, but it is this Government who are taking the campaign very seriously. I will not resile from that. I have told the campaign I will look at the evidence I have. It was submitted at the end of last year; it is a substantial file. It is because I take this so seriously that I am not going to rush it. It would be a mistake to do that today. What I am going to do is look at it over the summer, meet the campaign group in September and reach a decision after that. The right hon. Gentleman should not allow anybody to think that this means I do not take it seriously; the Government take it very seriously and will reach a proper conclusion when I have looked at all the evidence.

Sir Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): The future of South Yorkshire police is clearly linked to this. These allegations are historical, but if we bring them together with more contemporary problems it seems to be a force that has institutionalised dysfunctionality. Surely my right hon. Friend now must look at the future function of South Yorkshire police’s management, and not shy away from any fundamental reorganisation?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that we are doing exactly that. He draws an important point to our attention, and it is particularly that issue that the IPCC is looking at. I can reassure my right hon. Friend, as well as the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) and the House, that the work of the IPCC will not delay the work that I will be doing in looking at this particular case.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): The 1980s were a quite shocking time in politics. I know that Conservative Members will disagree, but it was a difficult time to be growing up, under Thatcher, and a distressing experience for many of us. There are many examples to
illustrate that, but what happened at Orgreave was one of the most shocking examples of all. It is not just me who is saying that. Liberty has said: "There was a riot. But it was a police riot."

Michael Mansfield QC has called it the "worst example of a mass frame-up in this country this century."

Obviously, he was talking about the last century. Alan Billings, the South Yorkshire police and crime commissioner has said that, on that day, the police were "dangerously close to being used as an instrument of state."

That is frightening indeed. The SNP welcomes the findings of the Hillsborough inquiry and urges the UK Government to ensure that accountability follows, but we can call on them to go further by not looking at that tragedy in isolation. It is imperative that there should be an inquiry into the policing of Orgreave to ensure that justice is done and the public can regain trust—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the hon. Lady, but I am afraid that she has exceeded her time.

Anne McLaughlin: I am sorry. I thought I had two minutes.

Mr Speaker: Order. We really must establish the principle that a time limit on an urgent question is a time limit on an urgent question. I do not want to single the hon. Lady out, but her question was too long. Forgive me.

Amber Rudd: I understand entirely the point that the hon. Lady is raising. It is about the crossover of police behaviour in the Hillsborough incident and the Orgreave incident. She raises an important point, and she is right to say that there are serious allegations to be addressed. That is what the IPCC will be looking at, but we will also be making sure that the incident at Orgreave and the questions that she has raised will be carefully examined.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend also assure us that any investigation that takes place will hear evidence from police officers who were allegedly injured by missiles while doing their duty in allowing people lawfully to go to work?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is of course right: this cannot be a one-sided inquiry or investigation. I will ensure that we look at both sides of this, but I must tell him that there are some serious allegations to be considered.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): One of the things that occurred in the Hillsborough inquiry was that my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) and other people exposed the fact that the police were writing similar things about similar incidents. It has already been explained that the South Yorkshire police did exactly the same thing at Orgreave. I went there and saw it for myself. It was one-way traffic by the police, and then the same statement was written over and over again for each of the miners. So I hope the Home Secretary is not going to be hanging about for very long on this. An overt promise was made by the last Home Secretary that, arising out of Hillsborough, the Orgreave case would be linked to it. Let’s have some truth and justice for Orgreave.
Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): There is a strong thread between Orgreave and Hillsborough, but there is also a parallel with Shrewsbury. The only way to disprove what the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) just said about political motivations is to have a full independent inquiry. Why doesn’t she get on with it and just do it?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his view, but I repeat that it would be wrong for me to just, as he puts it, “get on with it”. I want to look at the evidence; the process must be driven by evidence. The Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign spent six months pulling together a substantial package and body of evidence. I will not ignore its work; I will take a careful look at all of it.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): I am really concerned about the language already being used by the right hon. Lady about the Orgreave incident. She just classified the incident at the Dispatch Box as a “miners’ clash”. Would she like to clarify those words to the House?

Amber Rudd: I am happy to refer to it as an incident—the word that the hon. Gentleman uses—but it is more important to ensure that we look carefully at all the evidence. Once I have had a look at all the evidence and have reached a conclusion, I will be able to come back and describe it as what it really was.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Orgreave is in my constituency and people still come to my surgery in tears after reliving the horror they saw when they went with their families to picket peacefully, the violent abuse that they suffered and the vile media campaign afterwards. Will the Home Secretary please give them justice and peace by holding a public inquiry?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady makes a clear and passionate case as she always does in the House when she campaigns. My office spoke to the campaign group this morning and I will be meeting the group in September. I appreciate the levels of distress, hurt and historical anger that are part of this case, which is why I will take it seriously.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): With my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), I brought the campaign group down to meet the then Home Secretary over a year ago. It was therefore unexpected and unwelcome to hear last week that, after all that, she was still waiting for the investigations to be concluded. The shadow Home Secretary raised a serious question about the IPCC’s advice. Will the Home Secretary take this opportunity to correct the record, and will she give a firm commitment about exactly when after meeting the campaign group in September she will be making a decision?

Amber Rudd: I recognise that this has been a long time in coming—the incident happened of course in 1984. The previous Home Secretary met the campaign group in July last year. Six months later, it came back with the evidence, so we have had that since the end of last year. I have decided that I will look at it over the summer—it is substantial—and will meet the campaign group in September. I will come to a decision as soon as I can after that. I hesitate to say anything firmer than that, but I reassure the hon. Lady that I will come to a decision as soon as I can.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Does the Home Secretary recognise that Orgreave was a scandalous episode that we will not get to the bottom of unless we get to the top of it? That is why many people are suspicious of any possible denial or deferral of a due inquiry.

Amber Rudd: I know about the concerns that the hon. Gentleman refers to when he says “the top of it” and that is what the IPCC is focused on. It is about looking at the connections between the Hillsborough inquiry that we have already had and Orgreave. I will not shy away from looking carefully at wherever there has been wrongdoing or wherever there are links.

Mr Clive Bets (Sheffield South East) (Lab): While Orgreave happened many years ago, problems still exist in South Yorkshire police, as the recent peer review identified. I thank the previous Home Secretary and the previous Policing Minister, the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning), for their help in setting up that peer review and their support for the police and crime commissioner in getting in an interim chief constable and then appointing a permanent chief constable—that was welcome. Will the Home Secretary now commit to support the IPCC in addressing the issue identified by the peer review? Will she also have a look at the role of Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary? It has done several reviews of South Yorkshire police in recent years but never identified the issues raised by the peer review.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman asks an important question. He is right: we hope that there will be progress under the new leadership. We will carefully follow progress under Dave Jones. My colleague the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), has already said he will be going to visit over the summer, so we are taking seriously the improvements that the new leadership has said that it will make.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Home Secretary said that she will make a decision in the autumn, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) and for Halton (Derek Twigg) and I, as chair of the all-party group on the Hillsborough disaster, spent many hours talking with the Home Secretary’s predecessor and the IPCC to understand the consequences of the decisions being made about that injustice. Will the Home Secretary speak to the Prime Minister about that experience to learn those lessons and will she commit to meeting extensively with Members about the horrific events at Orgreave?

Amber Rudd: I can certainly give the hon. Lady that commitment. I have already said that I will meet the right hon. Member for Leigh. If any other colleagues would like to join us in that meeting, I will also meet them to ensure that I am fully informed and up to date on the whole issue and the campaign thus far.
Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is important that not all police officers are tarred with the same brush on Orgreave. I have heard personal testimony from Greater Manchester police officers saying that they did not co-operate with the corrupt practices of South Yorkshire police during the dispute. How does the Home Secretary suggest that I feed in that evidence?

Amber Rudd: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, which was also made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) in reference to his father. We must ensure that not everyone is tarred with the same brush—if indeed that is what happens. I will be delighted to receive any information from the hon. Gentleman that would help to reach a decision and that could form part of the inquiry that I am looking at in September.

Mr Speaker: Order. Presentation of Bill, Geraint Davies—where is the chappie? He is not here. [Hon. Members: He’s behind you! Better late than never.]

BILLS PRESENTED

UK INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND INVESTMENT AGREEMENTS (RATIFICATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Geraint Davies, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, Hywel Williams, Mr Mark Williams, Helen Goodman, Sir Alan Meale, Jonathan Reynolds, Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck, Mark Durkan, Stewart Malcolm McDonald and Stephen Twigg, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to lay bilateral and multilateral trade and investment agreements before Parliament; to prohibit the implementation of such an agreement without the approval by resolution of each House; to provide a process for the amendment of such agreements, including any arrangements for investor-state dispute settlement, by Parliament; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 28 October, and to be printed (Bill 56).

PERINATAL MENTAL ILLNESS (NHS FAMILY SERVICES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Rehman Chishti, supported by Norman Lamb, Yasmin Qureshi, Kelly Tolhurst and Tim Loughton, presented a Bill to make provision about the appropriate level of access to NHS services and accommodation for mothers with perinatal mental illness; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 December, and to be printed (Bill 57).

Electoral Reform (Proportional Representation and Reduction of Voting Age) Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.59 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the Representation of the People Acts to provide for the introduction of proportional representation as a method for electing Members of the House of Commons; to reduce the voting age to 16 in all UK elections and referendums; and for connected purposes.

I am introducing this Bill today because our electoral system is broken and we urgently need to address some of the reasons why. As a country, we pride ourselves on our strong commitment to democracy, yet the vast majority of votes cast up and down the land simply do not count. Power is held by a small minority, and the voting system upholds that status quo. We may be on the path to leaving the EU, but all those who were promised they would be given back “control” simply will not have it without meaningful electoral reform.

The current unrepresentative voting system is doing long-term pervasive damage, which manifests itself in phenomena such as a widespread lack of trust and faith in public servants, and the growth of what some have coined, with Orwellian overtones, “post-truth politics”. Far too many of our constituents are disillusioned, disaffected and disengaged, and continuing to deny them a voice in the decisions that affect us all only perpetuates the problems. Yet, that is exactly what happens under our first-past-the-post voting system. It is a system where votes are not all equal, because unless someone lives in one of the small number of heavily targeted marginal seats, their vote simply does not count. The Electoral Reform Society has described the 2015 general election as “the most disproportionate in electoral history”, with this Government elected on just 24% of the eligible vote.

First past the post has a long record of failing to deliver Governments who command genuine majority support. In 1997, Labour gained 43.2% of the total votes cast but won 63% of seats at Westminster. In that same election the combined number of votes for the Tories and Liberal Democrats represented 47.5% of the total votes, nearly 4% more than Labour, yet between them they got 32.1% of the seats available at Westminster. No Prime Minister since 1951 has won a majority of the vote to match his or her majority in the Commons—not Blair, not Thatcher, not Attlee.

Moreover, first past the post creates seats so safe that some incumbents are so relaxed as to be almost horizontal. This complacency in MPs is matched by disillusionment among voters. How does it engage people in the political process if large numbers are driven to vote tactically, rather than to vote for what they actually want, because, as so many campaign leaflets are always reminding us, “Party X can’t win in this area”? Interestingly, MPs in safe seats were twice as likely as those with the smallest majorities to be found abusing the expenses system.
In the 1950s, most people simply voted Labour or Conservative, but since then the proportion of people voting for the two main parties has fallen from 97% to 67%. Parties other than the big three received 10% of the votes at the 2005 and 2010 elections, but in 2015 that rose to a staggering 24.9%—nearly a quarter and the biggest share since 1945. In other words, people vote differently now, and we need a voting system that is updated to reflect that.

My Bill would introduce a proportional voting system. There are two main PR systems, but my preference is for the additional member system, because it retains the constituency link, which most MPs value enormously. But I have deliberately not specified which system should be introduced, because it is the principle that I am seeking to establish at this stage. All voting systems have advantages and drawbacks, but none are so mind-bending that the public cannot cope with their complexities, despite what many detractors of PR like to claim. They perhaps forget that voters already manage with a PR system used for the London Assembly and for the Scottish and Welsh Parliament Members, and of course we have the single transferable vote for European elections. That same attitude demonstrates the very lack of respect for voters that adherence to the disproportionate first-past-the-post system perpetuates. Voters are not stupid; they know when they are being spun a line or patronised. It is deeply insulting to be denying them a fair vote on the basis that they would not know how to use it. As an aside, let me say that the fact voters decisively rejected the alternative vote system in 2011 is irrelevant; AV is not PR.

Under PR there is a simple relationship of cause and effect for voters. If they vote for a candidate, they increase his or her chances of getting elected. If they vote for a party, they increase that party's entitlement to seats. By doing this, they achieve more representation for their views. First past the post does not deliver seats that look like the votes cast, whereas PR does. A winner-takes-all system in which the Conservatives claim to have a mandate based on 37% of the vote and just 24% of the electorate is not sustainable, nor is one in which the Greens quadrupled their share of the vote nationally, to 1.1 million votes in 2015, and got one seat. The UK Independence party polled 3.8 million votes, and although I do not like its policies, it is still not right that it got just one seat. The Scottish National party, whose Members I am glad to call my hon. Friends, polled 1.4 million and won 56 seats. I know that even they would agree that that is a little disproportionate, which is why they are here in such force—I welcome that and am grateful to them. Of course, changing the voting system would not necessarily have changed the overall outcome, but that is not the central point here. The main reason for introducing PR is that making every vote count is a vital part of the process of reconnecting people and politics. I believe that encouraging more people to come out to vote because they know their vote matters would lead to an increased voter turnout.

Some people say that people are not interested in politics, but everyone is interested in the state of their local schools and in whether or not they have a local hospital. Those are political matters. Whatever someone's take on the recent EU referendum, it demonstrated that if people are given a say, they can be very political indeed, in the best possible sense of the word—as citizens who feel they can be genuine agents for change. I would also anticipate that under PR we would return a Parliament that better reflects modern Britain. Only 29% of MPs are women and although that is more than ever before, it still not right when women make up just over half the country's adult population. People of colour, disabled people, carers, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender—LGBT—people are still under-represented in Parliament. I think that would change under PR, because MPs would not be able just to rely on the votes of their tribe. To win the support of the majority of voters, they would be forced to reach out across the party divides to the wider electorate: to more women, to more black and minority ethnic—BME—communities and so forth. I hope that would mean traditionally excluded groups standing for election, too.

Above all, proportional representation is about fairness, which is why my Bill puts PR hand in hand with giving 16 and 17-year-olds the vote. Sixteen-year-olds are considered old enough to enter into marriage and civil partnerships, pay income tax and national insurance, obtain welfare benefits in their own right, and join the armed forces, a political party or a trade union. Surely they should help elect the MPs who make decisions about those very things. About 64% of registered voters aged 18 to 24 went to the polls in the EU referendum, compared with an estimated 52% in the last general election. In other words, increased awareness of voter registration, combined with a vote that actually counts, means that young people come out in large numbers to voice their opinions.

The United Kingdom was one of the first countries in the world to lower the voting age from 21 to 18, but it is now trailing behind countries such as Brazil, Argentina, and Austria—unless, of course, you live in Scotland, which has blazed a trail with a more inclusive and equal political system, through giving 16 and 17-year-olds the vote in the independence referendum. Those young people need a say, not just on the future of the Union, but on all the decisions that affect their future. We also need equality between 16 and 17-year-olds in Scotland and those in the rest of the UK.

If democracy is about fairly representing the views of the people, our current democratic system is failing. In future, especially with the Government's planned boundary changes, that could get even worse. PR would bring some much-needed fairness, as well as helping to tackle some of the reasons why people do not vote—the idea that their vote does not make a difference. Just under a month ago, people opted to take back control of our democracy, yet unless we reform the electoral system they will still have virtually no control over who runs the country or represents them in Parliament. Much has rightly been said about the importance of reversing the alienation and neglect felt in many parts of our country, which this EU referendum result laid bare. I believe that electoral reform and votes at 16 have a key role to play in healing the country and bringing it back together. They are a way of demonstrating to people that, yes, every vote they cast is important and, yes, their voice does matter and indeed has been heard.

1.9 pm

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): As we have heard, this Bill would do two things. Reducing the voting age has been repeatedly discussed and rejected.
by sizeable margins in the Commons in the past 12 months. It was discussed, for example, in multiple stages of both the Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill and the European Union Referendum Bill, so I will not rehash all the same arguments here.

The proposed Bill would also change the voting system. Although I acknowledge and respect the energetic commitment and zeal of the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for this particular cause, I fear that this Bill may harm our democracy rather than help it—the exact opposite of what she intends to achieve—because we held a referendum on whether to change our voting system in 2011 and, collectively, we voted against change. We decided to keep our tried and trusted first-past-the-post system by a hefty margin of more than two to one. Therefore, a proposed Bill that claims to be about improving our democracy starts with a proposal to ignore a very clear democratic decision. The people have spoken, and, by a majority of more than 6 million, they have decided that they want none of this. Some would argue—in fact the hon. Lady did—that the 2011 referendum result should not count; that it asked the wrong question about the alternative vote system, which is not technically a proportional system at all; and that if only they could be allowed to rerun the poll with a slightly different question somehow a completely different result could be achieved.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. There is no concept of giving way in respect of exchanges on ten-minute rule motions, a factor of which the right hon. Gentleman with his long experience ought to be aware.

John Penrose: I am happy to pick the matter up with the right hon. Gentleman in the Tea Room afterwards.

Let us ignore, for the moment, the unlikelihood of a 6 million vote majority being overturned by a small change in the question, and just consider for a second the dozens and dozens of different forms of proportional and alternative voting systems. It does not matter whether we are talking about open lists, zipped lists, the D’Hondt method, supplementary votes or transferrable votes, every different version has its own passionate and committed band of dedicated enthusiasts. Some of them are highly reputable organisations and others are lonely obsessives blogging furiously in the privacy of their parents’ spare bedrooms. No matter who they are, it is simply not possible to argue that we should ignore the AV referendum result just because it did not propose precisely their preferred flavour of new voting system. That fundamentally misses the point. Not only did voters reject changing our tried and trusted first-past-the-post system, but they will take a very dim view indeed of the prospect of many further referendums in future as dozens of other organisations queue up to argue that the last poll did not propose precisely their particular favourite voting system and to demand yet another rerun with a slightly different question.

Even worse, this Bill comes at a time when a large proportion of the population is far more concerned about the much more recent EU referendum where there was a narrower—although still decisive—majority verdict. I am not alone in getting hundreds of emails from people who do not like the result of the EU vote and are loudly demanding a rerun, a vote in Parliament, a lawsuit, anything in fact, to change the result. By telling people they can ignore the results of the even more decisive AV referendum in 2011, this Bill would implicitly encourage people to believe that they can ignore the result of the EU referendum too, telling them, in effect, that if they stick their fingers in their ears and sing Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” loudly enough, Brexit may not actually mean Brexit after all.

Our democracy is already pretty fragile, with trust in politics and politicians, and election turnout, already worryingly low. I cannot think of anything more calculated to stoke the fires of anti-political anger than acting as if the will of the people, clearly expressed in not just one but two separate referendums on different issues, might not be democratically binding or sovereign after all.

So please, Mr Speaker, enough already. This Bill ignores the repeatedly expressed democratic will of Parliament, which has already rejected lowering the voting age many times over the past year, and it ignores a thumping referendum verdict against changing the voting system in 2011 as well. We are about to abolish an entire layer of proportionately elected representatives when we get rid of MEPs as we leave the EU. Now is not the time to replace them with something else. The people have spoken and even though I understand and respect the fact that the answer is not to the hon. Lady’s liking, I urge her please to respect its democratic power and to leave the issue alone for a long, long time.

Question put (Standing Order No. 23).

The House divided: Ayes 74, Noes 81.

Division No. 50

AYES

Allen, Mr Graham

Bardell, Hannah

Black, Mhairi

Blackford, Ian

Blackman, Kirsty

Blomfield, Paul

Boswell, Philip

Brake, rh Tom

Brock, Deidre

Brown, Alan

Cameron, Dr Lisa

Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair

Chapman, Douglas

Cowan, Ronnie

Creasy, Stella

Cruddas, Jon

Day, Martyn

Docherty-Hughes, Martin

Donaldson, Stuart Blair

Durkan, Mark

Edwards, Jonathan

Farron, Tim

Ferrier, Margaret

Gethins, Stephen

Gibson, Patricia

Glass, Pat

Goodman, Helen

Grady, Patrick

Grant, Peter

Gray, Neil

Greenwood, Margaret

Hayes, Helen

Hendry, Drew

Hosie, Stewart

Howlett, Ben

Kerevan, George

Lamb, rh Norman

Lewis, Clive

Lucas, Caroline

MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan

Mc Nally, John

McCaig, Callum

McDonald, Stewart Malcolm

McDonald, Stuart C.

McDonnell, Dr Alasdair

McLaughlin, Anne

Meale, Sir Alan

Monaghan, Carol

Monaghan, Dr Paul

Mulholland, Greg

Mullin, Roger

Newlands, Gavin

Nicolson, John

O’Hara, Brendan

Oswald, Kirsten

Paterson, Steven

Phillips, Jess

Reynolds, Jonathan

Ritchie, Ms Margaret

Robertson, rh Angus

Noes

Ayes 74, Noes 81.
Question accordingly negatived.

1.26 pm

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): Before I move the motion, I take the opportunity to welcome the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and members of his team to their posts.

I beg to move,

That this House notes that the Government intends to cut housing benefit for vulnerable people in specialist housing, including elderly people and people who are homeless, disabled or fleeing domestic violence; believes that this will have harmful effects on current and future tenants of these specialist housing schemes; further notes that there is already a significant shortfall in this type of housing provision across the country; notes that charities, housing associations, councils and others have made Government Ministers aware of the damaging impact these cuts will have on tenants and the financial viability of these schemes and that the Government’s proposal to mitigate these cuts with discretionary housing payments will not compensate for these cuts; notes that the Government’s own evidence review into the impact of its decision, commissioned in December 2015, has yet to be published; notes that the Government has postponed the implementation of these cuts for new tenants to April 2017 but plans to fully roll out its planned cuts to housing benefit in April 2018; and therefore calls on the Government to exempt supported housing from its planned cuts to housing benefit in April 2018; and to consult fully with supported housing providers to identify ways in which all vulnerable people who need supported housing can access it.

Six months ago my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) led an Opposition day debate on the Government’s decision to cap housing benefit support for vulnerable people in specialist housing. The decision will affect elderly citizens, our armed forces veterans, those with disabilities, people with learning difficulties and people with mental health problems. It will hit homeless people and it will jeopardise the safety of people fleeing domestic violence.

Following pressure from the Opposition Benches, and concerns raised by Members on the Government Benches, there was an interesting debate last week led by the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous). A campaign has been mounted across the country by community groups and housing providers. I was pleased that the Government agreed to delay the implementation of the cap, but I press Ministers now to go one step further. They must reverse their decision to slash housing benefit for a huge range of vulnerable people living in supported housing. What kind of country would we be if we abandoned the most vulnerable in our society? What kind of message will it send, not just to the world, about the priorities of this Government?

What credibility will be left for the outgoing Prime Minister’s repeated assertion that the Government would not balance the books on the backs of the poorest? Unless Ministers reverse that destructive decision, that is precisely what they will be doing. I am willing to give way to the Secretary of State if he is prepared to stand at the Dispatch Box, say that he will reverse the decision, and make the announcement that we are all hoping for.

To implement that decision would be a damning legacy for the former Prime Minister and a broken promise to...
those who can least afford it. The decision is not just detrimental to the most vulnerable members of society; in purely financial terms, it makes no sense.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend not agree that it is becoming more difficult for people to get housing benefit, and that in some instances, it might not be adequate?

Grahame M. Morris: Indeed, that is the case. The groups I originally listed are some of the most vulnerable in society—they are people who should be protected and who require supported housing. If the Government proceed on their intended course, some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people will be further disadvantaged, and the cost to the taxpayer and the Exchequer will be greater.

The Government’s proposal does not make financial sense, and it leaves the providers of supported housing in an invidious position. I know that housing providers—I have met many of them—breathed a collective sigh of relief when the decision to cap support was delayed pending a review, but they are still left in a very precarious position, with the sword of Damocles hanging over the services they provide.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne pointed out in a debate in the House on 27 January, unless the Government reverse this pernicious proposal, 156,000 units of supported and sheltered housing may have to close.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an important point. I have received a letter from the New Charter housing group, which operates social housing in the Tameside part of my constituency. New Charter hits the nail on the head when it says that, as a result of this proposal, it “will not have the income to sustain the provision of supported housing” and “will inevitably see the closure of some schemes.”

It adds:

“Many of these supported and sheltered schemes” in Tameside will “become financially unviable”.

Is that not exactly what will happen up and down the country if these cuts continue?

Grahame M. Morris: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point in a very concise way. [Interruption.] A member of the Government is saying from a sedentary position, “They don’t know,” but the situation is absolutely clear. The point I am trying to make is that housing providers need certainty over their income streams before they can plan for new provision—that is a reasonable point, which I am sure is not beyond the understanding of Ministers with a financial background.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Is it not important to do this review, with housing benefit being rolled into universal credit? There is scaremongering that there are going to be cuts, but people do not actually know what the outcome is going to be, so let us have a constructive discussion during the review and give some certainty to the sector.

Grahame M. Morris: With respect, I must point out that Government decisions should be based on evidence. Before embarking on a plan and a policy, it would be sensible to look at the evidence objectively and scientifically. If the hon. Lady wants expert opinion, I am happy to give her that and to quote the chief executive of the National Housing Federation, David Orr, who met the then Housing Minister on 18 December last year. He said—this is an expert in the field—that the impact of the local housing allowance cap will be “stark and make it extremely difficult for any housing associations to develop new supported housing.”

He also said:

“providers across the country will be forced to close schemes.”

There is plenty of evidence of that, and I am sure that Members on both sides of the House have had representations from housing associations and housing providers.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman understand that a research project is now looking at this evidence? That conflicts with his motion on the Order Paper, which says:

“the Government intends to cut housing benefit for vulnerable people”.

That is pure scaremongering.

Grahame M. Morris: It is a matter of fact. It is a kind of chicken-and-egg situation: surely you review the evidence before you announce a decision and then put it on hold. I believe the review was started in 2015—perhaps the Minister can correct me if I am wrong—so why are we still waiting for the results? Why did the Chancellor of the Exchequer make an autumn statement that had huge implications for some of the most vulnerable people living in supported housing, without looking at the evidence first?

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Grahame M. Morris: I will give way this once, and then I would like to make a little more progress.

Richard Fuller: I do hope the hon. Gentleman will talk about the 20 years prior to this review, when there was no review. For many years under the Labour Government, there was no review of what was happening with the additional housing benefit for people in supported housing or of how it was being spent. Does he remember that in the last debate on this issue, many people said they did not know where that money was? They did not know how much money was being spent, what it was being spent on or whether it was effective. Are the Government not therefore absolutely right to conduct this review and then to come forward with their proposals? Is he really not just scaremongering?

Grahame M. Morris: We have to deal with the position we now find ourselves in. Demand for supported housing has changed and increased dramatically. One million people rely on food banks, which certainly was not the
case 10 years ago. We have a huge problem with people suffering from mental health problems and learning difficulties. We have a debt to our armed services personnel—our veterans—many of whom have post-traumatic stress disorder and need supported housing.

There are therefore new factors that we need to take account of, but, if I may be so presumptuous, it is surely the job of the Government to commission the studies. [Interruption.] Well, indeed. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne and my noble Friend Lord Beecham—or Jeremy Beecham, as we know him—have tabled a series of questions and got the answer that Ministers do not know. That is a bit of an indictment of Ministers, who are supposed to compile an evidence base on which to make decisions.

Looking again at the advice of professionals, we see that the National Housing Federation estimates that a staggering 80% of the total planned new build will not be built.

Richard Fuller indicated dissent.

Grahame M. Morris: The hon. Gentleman is shaking his head, but this is—[Interruption.] In practical terms it means that 9,270 specialist homes will not be built—[Interruption.] I will tell the hon. Gentleman why that is, because he is chuntering.

Richard Fuller: I am sceptical.

Grahame M. Morris: Sorry, the hon. Gentleman is sceptical. The reason is that providers need certainty; without certainty they cannot proceed. Often, they are raising funding for these schemes—I can see the Minister for Housing and Planning nodding in agreement—and they need certainty when going to the market. Where there is uncertainty, they cannot raise the necessary funding. On that basis, as responsible organisations—they are a mixture of local authorities, housing associations, charities, charitable trusts and so on—they cannot reasonably go on to build the supported housing units I think everyone in the House agrees we need.

There is another effect as well. That situation, in turn, has a knock-on effect on the construction industry. The jobs that would have been created, and that I think we all want, will not now happen. This is an important sector, and we should be growing it, not allowing it to contract. At a time when house building outside London remains in the doldrums, that will be another setback for the industry and the economy.

How on earth can Ministers expect supported housing providers to continue, when they know that spending cuts and other policy decisions have already hit people living in supported housing schemes? Supported housing provides vital help for tens of thousands of people across this country. It is mark of a decent, civilised society that services such as this exist in the first place. They play a crucial role in providing a safe and secure home with support so that people can live independently and others can get their lives back on track. As I mentioned, that includes supporting ex-servicemen and women to find a stable home, including those suffering from post-traumatic problems, and with mental health needs and physical disability needs.

I remind the House of the armed forces covenant, which sets out the relationship between the nation, the Government and the armed forces. It recognises that the nation as a whole and this House in particular have a moral obligation—I call it a debt of honour—to members of the armed forces and their families. It establishes how they should expect to be treated and how we should expect to treat them. I am an eternal optimist—I am a Sunderland supporter and we have escaped four times—but if Ministers do not do a U-turn today, they will be breaking that covenant with our veterans and those who have given so much in service to their country.

In addition to ex-servicemen and women, many older people also rely on supported housing to maintain their independence. These elderly citizens have worked all their lives and paid their taxes, only to find in the autumn of their lives that their Government are turning their back on them. Personally, I think that is morally indefensible and a betrayal of a generation that gave us the welfare state and the national health service.

I know that some of my hon. Friends are going to address the issue of victims of domestic violence, who are another important group. Over time, a number of Members—not just Opposition Members, but Government Members—have raised concerns about the closure of homes for victims of domestic violence. I understand that at least 34 such establishments have closed, and I am advised by housing associations that all eight in my own region are at risk of closure, including that in my own constituency.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is talking about domestic violence refuges, but this Government committed £40 million in the autumn statement for services for victims of domestic abuse, which is a tripling of funding compared with the previous four years. Does he not welcome that?

Grahame M. Morris: I welcome the Government’s commitment to providing that specific support, but the problem is that the hostels, establishments and places of safety are disappearing. Places of safety are needed, mostly for women, but also for some men who have suffered violence and threats of death. It would be a terrible indictment of the Government if they allowed such establishments to be closed.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): On the £40 million, which has yet to be allocated, and the £10 million gift before the election, the bids for money to be allocated to Refuge were submitted with sustainability plans for the future based on housing benefit at its current rate. The Government signed off on every single one of those plans, but then, dishonestly, went back on them.

Grahame M. Morris: I am grateful for that instructive intervention.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing up the important issue of domestic abuse services. I am sure that he will agree with the concerns expressed to me by De Gwynedd Domestic Abuse Service and many other agencies that arrangements for abuse sufferers under the age of 35 when they are moving out of refuges may well put victims at risk.
Grahame M. Morris: I completely agree. This is a very real concern that affects the constituencies of Members on both sides of the House. I shudder to think what the consequences will be if these facilities are allowed to close. It would be simple for the Secretary of State to announce from the Dispatch Box that he will do a U-turn on supported housing. The whole House and the country would breathe a sigh of relief if he did that.

Homeless people are another defenceless and vulnerable group who can and do benefit from supported housing. Supported housing for homeless people with complex and multiple needs, such as mental health problems, can help them to make the transition from life on the streets into a settled home. It can help them with education, training, life skills and normal socialisation. It also helps homeless people in desperate circumstances to stabilise their lives, and it can assist them into employment and a stable future. In short, it brings dignity back into homeless people's lives and enables them to participate fully in society once again. It can also provide huge savings for our criminal justice system.

There has already been a steep rise in rough sleeping since the coalition Government came to power in 2010. That has been caused by a number of factors, not least the combined impact of rising rents, cuts to housing benefit allowances, which have affected younger people in particular, and reductions in services that local authorities can offer to vulnerable people on the brink of homelessness. Unless the Government have a rethink about the housing benefit system, there will be a further rise in homelessness. The inherent cost to the Treasury and society must not be pushed to one side. Are Ministers seriously suggesting that, in the sixth richest economy in the world, this cannot possibly countenance these cuts. I have heard Ministers waxing lyrical about the importance of mental health provision, and I absolutely agree with them. It should be a priority and they have said that it must be a higher priority. People with significant mental health needs often have to utilise supported housing—the hon. Member for Waveney made this point in an Adjournment debate last week—to stabilise their lives and live more independently. If the Government's rhetoric about prioritising mental health provision, and I absolutely think it is, is to take the order of 19 months or so—is another issue. Does it really have to take that long to have an impact study on which the Government can base their policy?

I will make progress because a lot of right hon. and hon. Members want to take part and I do not want to stifle their contributions. In my opening remarks, I said that these cuts make no financial sense. I remind Ministers that the Government's own Home and Communities Agency has found that supported housing provision has a net positive financial benefit of about £640 million for the UK taxpayer every year. Rather than cutting provision for supported housing, the Government should now expand and improve it. The National Housing Federation has calculated that there is a current shortfall of 15,640 supported housing placements, so there is already considerable pressure on the sector. I have mentioned some of the reasons for that. Local authorities, housing associations, charities and other providers in this sector really want to deliver the supported housing that the people of this country need, but delivering this ambition is virtually impossible because the Government have made the operating environment so uncertain.

Incredibly, in last year's autumn statement, the then Chancellor introduced the cap on housing benefit to local housing allowance levels without the Government actually knowing what its impact would be. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne highlighted this point when he spoke at this Dispatch Box in January. Before the debate, he had asked Ministers for evidence about the impact of the decision. Specifically, if memory serves, he asked the Minister—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): Not me.

Grahame M. Morris: Perhaps I am mistaken and it was one of the Minister's colleagues.

Mr Jones: My right hon. Friend asked how many elderly people, how many women fleeing from domestic violence, how many people with mental health problems and how many young people leaving care would be affected, but, incredibly, the then Minister for Housing and Planning was not able to provide an answer. If the Government do not know how many people in supported housing are in receipt of housing benefit, how can we expect them to make a decision? It is absolutely vital to have such information to hand to make an informed decision.
Ministers did not know what a profound impact their decision would have on providers and on the people who depend on these services, and it seems that they still do not know, unless they are just not answering questions on this.

To be fair, Ministers did commission an evidence review, but that was back in January 2015. Even though the review had not reported on its findings at the time of the last autumn statement, the then Chancellor still ploughed on regardless. Six months ago, my right hon. Friend was assured that the review would be ready later this year. The Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), teased us in the Adjournment debate last week by suggesting that the review would be published imminently.

Did Ministers know what the impact would be when the Chancellor included this decision in his autumn statement? They did not know what the impact of their decision would be—that is for sure—when the issue was debated in this House six months ago. That raises the question: what is happening, and when will we know?

When it comes to making policy, Ministers are old hands at making policy in an evidence-free zone. The use of evidence to develop policy seems to be an alien concept to the Government, but I would have thought it was in the natural order of things. This is something of a travesty. Although the Government’s evidence review seems to have ground to a halt, Ministers cannot claim to be completely ignorant. After all, the providers of supported housing have made their feelings known. I am sure that Ministers—even those in the new ministerial team—have met housing associations, charities and providers. We have met them regularly, and they have made their views absolutely plain.

I have mentioned the views of David Orr. He has said that housing

“providers across the country will be forced to close schemes.”
He has described the difference between supported housing and general needs social housing and explained why rents in supported housing are higher. He has pointed out that

“The uncertainty about the future approach is already leading to supported housing under development being delayed or cancelled because of the long lead times involved in investment and development.”

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being most generous in giving way. He mentioned an “evidence-free zone”, but all I have noted so far from his speech are continual references to David Orr of the National Housing Federation. There are more voices in this industry than his. Is not the process the Government are going through about taking on those voices, and about gathering and discussing the information? There is not therefore an evidence-free zone.

Grahame M. Morris: I am grateful to the Minister—[Interruption.] I am sure it is just a matter of time. This is a terribly confusing time.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He is absolutely right that there is a plethora of housing providers. I have met and received evidence from Mencap, Golden Lane Housing, Rethink Mental Illness and Changing Lives, as well as various housing associations, such as North Star and the Durham Aged Mineworkers Homes Association, and the National Housing Federation itself, all of which have raised concerns about supported housing in particular sectors. I have not listed those supporting members of the forces, but there is a similar thread and strand bringing this all together.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Before my hon. Friend finishes his long list, which could possibly be even longer, may I remind him that the YMCA is desperately concerned about these proposals? We should place that concern on the record. I cannot believe anyone in this House wishes to destroy all the good work that the YMCA has undertaken.

Grahame M. Morris: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing out what an important role the YMCA plays in providing supported accommodation for young people, particularly those leaving care and those in the younger age bracket.

It is important that we look at the evidence. I do not think that the sums add up. Ministers seem to be drawn to an evidence-free policy, but surely it should be obvious to them that a local discretionary scheme will not work. Ministers have previously said that discretionary schemes can assist in mitigation, but that does not alleviate the uncertainty. Providers of supported housing need certainty in the rental stream to fund the cost of managing these schemes and to service the loan charges incurred in developing them in the first place. Any reasonable person—who alone a Minister—will know that people cannot rely on a fluctuating income stream to service the cost of a loan. If Ministers persist with this hum-issued plan—let me call it that—existing supported housing schemes will close, new supported housing schemes will be cancelled and some of the most vulnerable people will be left to fend for themselves.

The new Prime Minister once talked about the Conservative party as the “nasty party”. When she spoke on the steps of No. 10, she said she wanted “a country that works for everyone”. The Government have an opportunity today to prove that the Prime Minister meant what she said just seven days ago, but if the newly appointed Ministers refuse to listen to reason and proceed with these callous cuts, they will be demonstrating that the Conservatives have not really changed and truly deserve their label as the “nasty party”. I commend the motion to the House.

1.58 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): It is an unexpected pleasure to be back at this Dispatch Box. I thank the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame M. Morris) for his welcome to me and my new ministerial team. May I say at the outset that I absolutely understand the concerns he has expressed and that have been expressed by other Opposition Members in this and previous debates and, indeed, by Government Members as well? This is clearly a hugely important, sensitive and difficult issue, which is why I welcome this debate.

Before I move on to the principles on which I will take the decision, may I respond very directly to a couple of points made by the hon. Gentleman, who speaks for the Labour party on these issues? I agree with him that supported housing can and does relieve
pressure on other public services. It performs a hugely important job. That is precisely why I am considering very carefully the costs and benefits of supported housing in the round as part of the review that the Government have been conducting.

The hon. Gentleman asked for two things in his speech. First, he asked me to change the policy now. Secondly, he asked us to take the evidence first and then make a decision. I can either take one piece of advice or the other, but I really cannot take both. I have decided to take his second piece of advice: I will look at the evidence first and then take a decision, because that is the rational way to make policy.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned various representations he has received, particularly from the National Housing Federation. I am happy to assure him that the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, has received, particularly from the National Housing Federation. I am happy to assure him that the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), and Lord Freud met David Orr last week to discuss the precise details that we need to get right.

**John Healey** (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his post. Is he aware from his briefings that the evidence review started in December 2014? When will it be concluded?

**Damian Green**: I will, as the right hon. Gentleman. Gentleman would expect as an experienced denizen of this Dispatch Box on this subject, come to that in the course of my speech. This is, as I have said, a complex matter and it is important to get it right.

Let me start by setting out the principles on which I will operate in this area.

**Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): It is a great pleasure to welcome my right hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box. He has mentioned David Orr and there are other organisations that have concerns and that take different views on this subject. The Government have been in very active dialogue. Will my right hon. Friend commit to maintaining that dialogue as he goes through the evidence behind this policy?

**Damian Green**: Absolutely, I will. I am coming up, in a minute, to the six-day anniversary of my occupation of this post, so I apologise if I have not taken all the representations in person yet, but my Ministers and I are certainly trying very hard to do so.

As everyone on both sides of the House knows, the supported housing sector provides important support to a diverse range of groups and individuals across the country. It supports those with learning difficulties, allowing them to live as independently as possible; it provides a safe refuge for those escaping domestic violence; it helps ex-offenders make a successful transition back into mainstream society; and it supports those who have experienced homelessness. The sector helps to transform lives and it allows people to live as independently as possible, to move into work where possible, which is hugely important, and to be safe, healthy and happy. It is a very important sector.

As constituency Members, we all have examples of that kind of support being provided. I have visited the Porchlight project in my constituency, which helps vulnerable and isolated people get support with housing, mental health issues, education and employment. Vital work is done by this sector. From my previous experience in government, I have seen the value of the sector in the criminal justice system. A stable and supportive environment can be the key to reducing reoffending. For example, Stonham BASS provides accommodation for people who have been bailed by the courts or released on home detention curfew after they have served a prison sentence. The service reduces unnecessary imprisonment and the negative effects that it has on family life, employment and housing, and so helps to deter people from reoffending.

**Julian Knight**: I have discussed this matter with Solihull Carers, which has concerns. It understands that this is the first review of these things for 20 years. It also understands that the total bill for housing benefit in this country is some £25 billion, and that it is right that we take our time, explore all the options and try to come to the best resolution.

**Damian Green**: My hon. Friend is exactly right and the representations he has received are very wise. A huge sum of taxpayers’ money is being spent and it is important to spend it in the right way, not just in the taxpayers’ interest but so that it helps the particularly vulnerable groups that I have referred to as much as possible.

The Government have a strong track record in protecting supported housing. In the last Parliament, we found that many hostels and refuges were treated as “supported exempt accommodation” even though they did not fit the precise technical definition. We acted swiftly to introduce regulations to regularise the position and, vitally, to protect their income streams. We exempted supported housing from the benefit cap. We have continued to meet the housing costs for universal credit claimants through housing benefit. That is hugely important, because it means that providers do not have to adapt processes to accommodate the new arrangements while we work towards a more sustainable funding model that works for all parts of the sector.

I assure the House that I am prepared to listen carefully to the concerns of the supported housing sector regarding the application of local housing allowance rates. I will pray in aid as evidence of the flexibility with which I will approach this issue the written statement about welfare reform that is on the Order Paper today, which the hon. Member for Easington and others may have noticed. It deals with changes that I am making to and flexibilities that I am introducing into the universal credit regime. I hope people will take that as a sign that I am prepared to be as flexible as possible in making sure that these vital welfare policies actually work.

This issue is high on my list of priorities, so I am keen to ensure that the decisions I make do not unduly affect the sustainability of provision, the commissioning of new services or, particularly, the individuals who receive support. It is worth noting that the local housing allowance cap will not affect any benefit recipient until April 2018. My Department is working hard with colleagues at the Department for Communities and Local Government to resolve this issue. It is better to get this right than to rush to make a decision.

To answer the question from the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) directly, I expect to make an announcement on the way forward in
the early autumn. We will spend the summer looking at the evidence and I will make an announcement in the early autumn.

John Healey: I am grateful for that confirmation, although we have seen other commitments and timescales come and go. We look forward to hearing from the Secretary of State and will hold him to that. May I correct something he said earlier? It will be from April 2017 that new tenancies will then be affected in April 2018, so these changes will come into effect before 2018 and affect people from April 2017 onwards. That is why it is important that he gets to grips with this problem urgently.

Damian Green: There is no disagreement between us. In cash terms, nobody will see their payments change until April 2018. That is what I was referring to. As I said, I expect to make an announcement in the early autumn. I hope that will provide the certainty that the sector is quite reasonably demanding.

Of course we understand that there are higher costs associated with providing supported housing than with providing general needs housing. I recognise the potential impact that this policy could have on the sector and its ability to support vulnerable people. I am also aware that this policy needs to be considered not on its own, but alongside other policies that affect the sector, including the 1% annual rent reduction for social sector tenants in England.

To return to the point about timing, in March, the Minister for Welfare Reform announced an exemption for this sector for one year. I hope that has provided some assurance for providers that nothing will happen precipitately while we complete the evidence review. That exemption, and a similar deferral of the 1% rent reduction, has been welcomed by the sector generally and, in particular, by the much-quoted National Housing Federation. When the deferral was announced, its chief executive said:

“We are pleased that the Government is listening to our concerns and has delayed the application of the LHA cap to people in…supported and sheltered housing.”

He also welcomed the fact “that there will be a full strategic review into how these services are funded and we will contribute fully to that review.”

I am very grateful to the NHF for making that commitment. It is doing so and will continue to do so until we find a solution.

We require a solution that is flexible enough to meet the needs of service users and providers while remaining affordable for the taxpayer and delivering value for money. We have been working with and listening not just to providers of supported housing and umbrella bodies—the NHF and the Local Government Association—but to individual local authorities and other local commissioners, as well as to those who represent the vulnerable groups who live in supported housing. We have of course also consulted the Welsh and Scottish Governments about the implications for them. That extensive dialogue has been crucial in shaping our thinking on this important issue. I want to continue that exchange of information and ideas.

Kevin Hollinrake: I welcome my right hon. Friend to his post. As part of the solution he mentions, will he look at the perceived barrier preventing people who benefit from this kind of accommodation from getting back into work? People I have met in these kinds of facilities locally feel that they cannot earn enough to be able to pay back the effective £250 a week cost of the accommodation.

Damian Green: My hon. Friend makes a profound point, not just about this specific issue but about, in essence, a huge amount of the work of my Department. Enabling people who are not in work to get back to work in some form is not only the best thing for the public purse but—absolutely and most importantly—almost always the best thing for them as well. For many of the people in the vulnerable groups we are talking about it will be especially valuable. Making sure that we come to a solution that contributes to that is absolutely vital.

Stephen Pound: I add my voice to the chorus of welcome to the right hon. Gentleman. He mentioned consultation with Cardiff and Edinburgh. Northern Ireland tends to get forgotten from time to time. Does this proposal have any relevance for Northern Ireland, and if so what consultation is taking place? I can speak slowly if he wishes to consult his colleague.

Damian Green: My understanding is that the matter is completely devolved to Northern Ireland, but if I have misread the House and so the hon. Gentleman I will write to him to correct myself. It is also conceivable that when the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), winds up the debate she may be wiser and better informed than me on that issue. It has been known for junior Ministers at the end of debates to be much better informed than their Secretary of State was at the start—we have all been there.

As has been said, my Department has commissioned an evidence review to look at the shape, scale and cost of the sector. Reform of the funding model was already being considered as worth doing in its own right, on its own merits, long before the LHA cap policy was announced in the last autumn statement. The point has been well made by several hon. Members. That this is the first full review of the provision for 20 years, so getting it right is quite important. As I have said, the review is in its final stages, and has already provided some valuable insights that I look forward to sharing with the House once the findings have been confirmed and tested.

The evidence review, discussions with the sector and the policy review undertaken by Government have all made it clear to me that, to fulfil our obligations to those people who rely on such accommodation and support, we must ensure four things. First, there must be appropriate funding to continue to support vulnerable people and sustain this vital sector. Secondly, the accommodation must deliver value for money for both the taxpayer and the individual being supported. Thirdly, those living in supported housing must receive high-quality outcomes and focused care and support. Fourthly, costs must be controlled. We cannot let the welfare bill get out of control. It is important that only those individuals who truly require the provision are able to access it, and that that provision matches genuine local need.

It is clear from the work undertaken so far that although the sector is delivering exemplary services and support in many places, the current system does not
deliver on all those objectives. There are genuine problems that need to be addressed. The reformed model that we will produce later this year needs to do more to ensure that value for money is sought by service commissioners and demonstrated by providers. Vitally, I want more focus on the quality of provision and individual outcomes for those who obtain the provision. That is an important next step for the sector.

**Jess Phillips**: I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman would like to rephrase what he has just said. In my experience, the voluntary sector has been producing outcomes data better than any Department for the past 10 years. If local government, or even national Government, were ever expected to get either the quantitative or qualitative data I used to have to get when I worked in refuge, you would fall apart immediately.

**Damian Green**

**[Damian Green]**

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am happy to be reassured on that; in no circumstances that I can envisage would you ever fall apart, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Lady actually made a profound point. The voluntary sector often provides services better than the state, at either local or national level. One central purpose of many of this Government’s policies is to harness the energy, ability and innovation of the voluntary sector precisely to provide services that might otherwise be provided less well by the state. My point was that, on the evidence I have seen so far, although it is true that some provision is absolutely excellent, it is also true that some falls well short, so it is sensible for Government to try to establish whether the way in which the sector is supported contributes to that situation. We want to build on existing examples to ensure more consistency in quality and value for money across the country. Nothing in that would cause any division in the House.

I understand the urgency of this matter. I have committed to making an announcement early in the autumn setting out the Government’s views on what the future funding solution should look like. That announcement will also set out plans for working with the sector and other key stakeholders to ensure a safe transition to the new model.

**Oliver Colvile** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend consider that he might also want to look at the cost of utility bills when it comes to supporting people who live in supported housing? That issue is part of the whole benefits story.

**Damian Green**: My hon. Friend makes a good point. That will certainly be fed into the review of the evidence that is now coming to an end. Between now and then I will continue to work with colleagues across Whitehall and with the sector to make sure we get right the detail underpinning the objectives I have just set out. Doing so will ensure reforms that are effective and proportionate. I believe that by working constructively with the sector we will come to a solution that is workable and deliverable, and that, most importantly, provides the best support possible to some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

I welcome this debate. It is perfectly reasonable and sensible for the Opposition to have called it, and I am keen to hear views from across the House and from those in the sector who I know will have urged Members on both sides of the House to raise their concerns today. The sector is very diverse and its needs very broad, so the more input and thought that go into developing a solution, the better the outcomes will be for all. We need to get this right. I am determined to do so, and we will. I invite the House to reject the motion before it.

**Several hon. Members rose**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing)**: Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many people wish to contribute to the debate and only limited time is available. After the spokesman for the Scottish National party has spoken, there will be a limit of five minutes on Back-Bench speeches.

2.19 pm

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State to his place. The SNP will continue to give him a hard time as much as we can.

I am glad to respond to this debate on behalf of the SNP and supported housing providers and clients in Scotland, who are deeply worried about what the future holds. Supported housing projects provide a range of people with vital support, which saves the Government money in hospital beds, prisons, and resolving homelessness. As the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) made clear in an Adjournment debate last Tuesday, a wide range of service provision is under threat due to continued uncertainty over this policy.

I am appalled that the people supported by this sector are being put at risk by the lackadaisical, “speak now, figure it out later” attitude that this Government take to social security. Supported housing covers a range of different housing types, including group homes, hostels, refuges, supported living complexes, and sheltered housing. Those schemes are designed to meet the needs of particular client groups, such as people with mental health issues, learning or physical disabilities, addiction issues, victims and women at risk of domestic violence, ex-service veterans, teenage parents, ex-offenders, or older people.

On Monday 13 June, the Communities and Local Government Committee heard evidence from Peter Searle, director of working age benefits from the Department for Work and Pensions, who told the Committee categorically that “the intention is to publish the evidence review and policy conclusions before the summer recess.”

More than a month has now passed, but we are no clearer on that. The Secretary of State says that it will happen in the autumn, but I remind him that the Government’s autumn statement last year ended up appearing in November, so I would like more clarity on when those conclusions will be published. I appreciate that the work is complex, but the Government have had a long time to figure it out. I am certain that many
housed providers in the sector will have told the
Government in a matter of days what they require, and
the review has already taken far too long. I hope that
the Government will not sneak out a statement on the
matter on Thursday when MPs will have limited time to
digest it before the House rises for the recess, and I seek
confirmation on that.

The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations
told me that the
“proposals for the capping of housing benefit for social housing
including supported housing to local Housing Allowance (LHA)
maxima will, as they stand, have a catastrophic effect on provision”.
The SFHA is not mincing its words, and it warns that
should the cap proceed, most provision of supported housing will be shut down or reduced in scope, future
development will be cancelled or mothballed, and—most
worryingly of all—tenants of supported housing and
their families and carers will find it difficult to plan for
the future. If those services go, there are very few
options for people who depend on the support they offer.

In Scotland we are limited as to what we can do
about the LHA cap. We have already spent in the region of £100 million mitigating the bedroom tax, until we are
able to abolish it. The welfare powers that the Scottish
Parliament is receiving do not extend to changing the rules on local housing allowance. As one would expect,
the Scottish Government have also condemned that
delay and uncertainty, with the then Cabinet Secretary
for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners Rights,
Alex Neil MSP, calling back in February for an end to
the “unacceptable state of uncertainty”. That was five
months ago, yet today we are no further forward.

Let me provide some illustrations of the types of services currently at risk. The Blue Triangle project in
Glasgow city centre provides supported accommodation for young people who are at risk of homelessness. The young people I met just before Christmas told me that they hugely valued the support and advice that they were given by staff on that project. One young man told me that his family situation had deteriorated, and he had found himself on the street. He fell in with a crowd who he thought were his friends, but he woke up in the street having been assaulted and robbed. He felt incredibly vulnerable, and had it not been for the service provided by Blue Triangle, he feared that he would not have survived that experience. Such a service does not come cheap, and the young people that it deals with need to be built up—they need help, and tailored support to
develop their skills and get their lives back on track.
The flats are based in the city centre, which is important in making the service easy to access, but that accommodation costs Blue Triangle significantly more
in rent. The building must also be kept safe and secure.
Flats need to be refurbished regularly due to the turnover
of tenants, and the quality of those flats is important to
give tenants a sense of dignity and self-worth. All that is
put at risk by continued uncertainty.

The current LHA shared accommodation rate in
Glasgow for those under 35 is £68.28, but rent for Blue
Triangle’s accommodation is £341.44 per week—a £273.16 shortfall. For the service over a year, that results in a
gap of £355,108. For young people who have nowhere else to go, that service is vital. The limit that the
Government want to put on housing benefit for young
people would leave them unable to afford accommodation of their own.

The ARCH resettlement service in Bridgeton is a
devastating impact”. That organisation has provided
some examples of the impact that the LHA cap will
have, and stated:
“In one rural area, introducing a cap linked to the LHA rate
would result in an annual loss of £5,800 for a 2 bedroom refuge
flat. In another urban area the annual loss for a 1 bedroom refuge
flat is £7,100. In another semi-urban area the loss on a 3 bedroom
refuge is £11,600 per year. In each case this financial cost will be
multiplied by the number of refuge spaces provided.”

It is clear that such losses will make the service unsustainable, and they will close.

The letter from Scottish Women’s Aid to Lord Freud
also mentioned the shared accommodation rate for
those under 35:
“The proposed introduction of the under 35s shared
accommodation rate to social rented housing also places women
under the age of 35 at much greater risk of further abuse. If
women under the age of 35 are unable to access refuge accommodation or
move into their own tenancy because of a restriction on their entitlement to housing benefit, this effectively prevents them from
leaving an abusive partner. In 2014-15, the 26-30 years old age
group had the highest incident rate of domestic abuse recorded by
the Police in Scotland. Women in this age group clearly have a
significant need for domestic abuse support services—including
refuge accommodation.”

It seems clear that the Government have little
understanding of the impact of their policies on women, and particularly on women suffering from domestic

violence and coercive control. Those policies are in addition to the two-child policy and the rape clause in tax credits, and the single household payment in universal credit. Such measures limit women’s options and put them at risk. The statement that the Secretary of State referred to gives me no reassurance that those aspects regarding the vulnerability of women in the welfare system have been addressed, and I seek further clarity and detail from Ministers on that.

In Scotland, refuges are sublet to women’s aid organisations from local authorities and housing associations, and funded by local and national Government. They are a crucial part of Scotland’s leading “Equally Safe” strategy to protect women and girls. The UK Government are undermining that significant work. We now have a female Prime Minister who claims to be a feminist. She needs to take note, as does her utterly gormless and heartless Welfare Reform Minister, who is unaccountable to this House.

Justin Tomlinson: I know that the hon. Lady does a huge amount of important work in this area, but the Government have trebled the funding for women’s refuges. The discretionary housing payment now stands at £870 million in this Parliament, and it is delivered with flexibility—working with the police, social services and medical professionals to provide the best support for the people being highlighted.

Alison Thewliss: The Government give with one hand and taketh away with the other. That is not good enough. It has also been made absolutely clear by women’s organisations, and a range of other organisations in the sector, that the discretionary housing payments are not enough to guarantee the certainty and future of these services. They are discretionary. That means that they are not part of the funding package; they are at the discretion of those providing that payment. That is not good enough. There needs to be greater certainty.

The Government need to make sure that the infrastructure to protect women and children is not dismantled under this supposedly feminist new Prime Minister. On her watch, these services must be guaranteed and that makes the best use of the money available.”

and that

“Services must be outcomes-focused, accountable, planned and responsive to individual and local needs.”—[Official Report, 12 July 2016; Vol. 613; c. 2723]

That suggests to me an element of a box-ticking exercise for these services. I caution that there are very varied support needs among those accessing supported accommodation. That must be reflected whatever the outcome of the review. A woman with children fleeing from a life of abuse and coercive control does not have the same needs as an elderly man moving into sheltered accommodation or a young person recovering from a stroke. We must be mindful of the needs of each person. When we talk about outcomes, it cannot just be that they move on after six months. As I mentioned earlier with the case of Donald, we are dealing with people who have very complex needs. They must be allowed to stay in that accommodation until such time as they are able to move on. If they are unable to move on and we push them out of that accommodation before time, they will end up on the streets or in prison. They will be very, very vulnerable.

I urge the Government to take the widest possible interpretation of value for money as regards these services. I am deeply concerned by the proposed changes. I have only scratched the surface of the impact of the LHA cap. I am sure that other speakers this afternoon will elaborate on that. Those who depend on accommodation for the elderly, services for those with learning or physical impairments, services for ex-service personnel, or any other type of supported accommodation and the support it provides, will be exceptionally vulnerable without them. Attending to their needs outwith specialist supported accommodation could mean hospital stays that cost about £530 per night or prison, which costs about £194,000 per year, not to mention the huge societal cost we all bear from the loss of those people’s potential. They can live life with a great degree of independence when they receive the right support and this type of accommodation. We need to think long term and invest in these services, and invest in preventive spend. Supported accommodation can save lives and it can turn lives around. The Government must recognise that and ensure the future of supported accommodation.

2.33 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate, which follows on from the Adjournment debate I led last Tuesday. This debate provides an opportunity to re-emphasise, this time to the new team at the Department for Work and Pensions, the vital importance of putting the funding of supported housing on a sustainable long-term footing as soon as possible. It is absolutely essential that we do this, so as to not to let down a very vulnerable group of people, whether they are elderly, young, have a physical disability, have suffered domestic violence or face mental health challenges.

Credit is due to the Government for carrying out the first evidence-based review of the sector for 20 years and for consulting far and wide. I welcome the fact that they have accepted the need for a long-term sustainable solution and not just a short-term sticking plaster, and that they will work with and listen to stakeholders to develop a viable and sustainable funding regime. My intention is to be helpful and not hostile, but I have to say that the feedback I am receiving is that those involved in supported housing are very worried about the future. The whole sector is at present in limbo and there is a policy vacuum that must be filled.

The one-year exemption for supported housing, from the 1% rent reduction for social housing landlords and the one-year delay in applying local housing allowance caps to residents in supported housing, provides some breathing space, but the clock is ticking down to April 2017 when this one-year grace period expires. It is
important to have new policies in place well before then, so as to remove worries about the viability of existing schemes and to act as a catalyst for attracting much-needed new investment into the sector. In the past three months, I have received representations, had meetings and visited a wide variety of organisations, national and local. They are all very concerned about the sector’s future. The depth and breadth of this worry emphasises the importance of putting in place a sustainable framework as soon as possible.

The prospect of the local housing allowance cap being applied to residents in supported housing after the one-year delay is causing considerable unease and concern. The cap undermines several pieces of legislation introduced in recent years including specified accommodation and the transforming care programme. In framing their proposals, it is absolutely vital that the Government have in mind the needs of those charities, housing associations and social investors, which are already active and doing great work in the sector, and those looking to get involved. There is an enormous amount of goodwill and capital waiting in the wings for a framework to be put in place, which will enable these social entrepreneurs to step up to the plate and carry out projects that will bring great benefits to many.

I shall be voting with the Government this afternoon, as I believe that it is fair to give the new team a chance to come up with a just and sustainable long-term strategy. I sense from what the Secretary of State has said that there is a real determination and desire to do that. There is a lot of work for them to do, but a lot of good ideas have been put forward, including by the National Housing Federation. It has made proposals, as has the Home Group. The latter has correctly identified the need for a new funding mechanism to be designed in such a way that it can be run by devolved Administrations.

I urge the Government to consider these proposals very, very carefully. I look forward to hearing from the Secretary of State when he returns to the Dispatch Box in the autumn with his recommendations for the Chamber to consider and debate. It is vital that we get this right. We owe it to a very vulnerable group of people.

2.37 pm

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous). He came to my Westminster Hall debate on this subject way back in March when the Government report was imminent, and he held his own Adjournment debate on this topic, which I attended, on the Floor of the House last week. It is not for want of raising the issue that we remain where we are today.

I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame M. Morris) to his new responsibilities and thank him for the way in which he has set out the Labour party’s case in what is Labour party debating time.

I welcome, too, the new Secretary of State to his new responsibilities. I think the worst thing I can say about him is that I actually do have confidence in him. I welcome the way he responded to the questions raised by my hon. Friend. In particular, I thank him for recognising firmly, from the Government Dispatch Box, the knock-on effects in this policy area. The introduction of the cap—I accept that the Government have postponed it for a year to provide a pause for further reflection—would have a profound impact on the Ministry of Justice, which he knows well, the Home Office, the police service, the ambulance service and the national health service.

Just about every point that could be made in this debate has been made in the last few months, but this point, in particular, has profound consequences, given the interventions that flow when the police pick up somebody who is incapable of looking after themselves or who is lonely, bewildered and without a supported home. They might be picked up by the health service, but the health service can offer no long-term solution to what is really a social care problem.

It seems to me that the Secretary of State is at the head of a difficult demarcation dispute over who should pay for the care element implicit in social housing—housing benefit certainly covers the housing element but also covers a care element. I understand his point about public funds and ensuring value for the public purse—I have no quarrel with that; the Government should always have a care for the quality of public spend—but in all the debates I have attended, not a single Conservative, Scottish National or Labour Member has raised an example of professional tax eating or anything close to it.

The projects that we have visited deal with elderly people who need a care element; individuals who have drug and alcohol problems but are not managing on their difficult path towards rehabilitation; children and young people who have care needs and should not be abandoned to the outside world, red in tooth and claw; people with physical and, even more, mental disabilities who can get by in the world with a bit of care, help and direction; people with learning disabilities; people who are estranged and having difficulty resettling into modern life; and homeless people who need assistance taking up and finding their way through the education and training schemes funded by the Department as well as the employment opportunities it works so hard to get people into.

Members from across the House have also raised the plight of women fleeing violence, terrified and in need of accommodation where they feel physically safe. Sure, housing benefit can provide the housing element, but, in all humanity, there is a need for care and support and for somebody to say to someone fleeing violence, “We’re on your side and we’re here to help you.” I hope that the Secretary of State will respond to that case over the next few months.

2.42 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): I pay tribute to the fantastic new team who will be responding to this debate and to the shadow Minister, whom I met in a former role and who demonstrated a real concern in this area. He was proactive in putting forward a powerful case, and one that I hope the Government will continue to listen to.

I welcome the tone of the new Secretary of State’s response. This is an incredibly complex area. We are talking about some of the most vulnerable people in society, and instinctively we want certainty. Clearly, that is a very powerful argument. If we could provide certainty, there would be much rejoicing, but sometimes we can...
be just too quick. This is such a complicated issue. I have visited many different organisations, charities and providers that do a wonderful job, but each and every one is unique in how it tackles the challenges around providing the right level of support and opportunities.

We cannot rush this; we have to get it right, because, otherwise, through unintended consequences, some of the most vulnerable people in society will pay the price of our rushing for the sake of an easy headline. I am encouraged that the team will do that and will engage with stakeholders, many of which have huge experience and very talented policy teams who come and helpfully spell out the best ways to proceed. By not rushing the decision, we can enable them genuinely to shape and influence what the Government do. It is not unreasonable for us to wait till the autumn for further details.

The Government have a proud record in this area. We currently spend about £50 billion supporting those with disabilities and long-term health conditions—an increase of £3 billion. Two hundred people a week are getting into work and coming off housing benefit. They are benefiting from the growing economy and rising wages. Our changes to housing benefit rules are saving approximately £2 billion, and let us not forget that more than 1 million social sector tenants will benefit from the 1% reduction in rents—they cannot be forgotten in this discussion.

People are typically spending seven months less in temporary housing accommodation. Our changes to the spare room subsidy have seen the waiting list go from 1.7 million to 1.2 million. I remember the anger in the Chamber during the urgent question that I faced and in many similar debates, but all too often families in inappropriate accommodation and on the housing waiting list are left looking enviously at people whose children have grown up and left home. It is right that we never forget them.

The increase in funding for the discretionary housing payment of £870 million over the Parliament will allow the flexibility to work with agencies such as the police, social services and medical professionals; and all that will be underlined by the public sector equality duty. We need also to recognise the importance of devolution and how in different towns and communities there are different challenges and opportunities. We have committed £400 million for the delivery of 8,000 specialist homes specifically for vulnerable and elderly people and those with disabilities. There has been a 79% increase in the disability facilities grant, meaning that the funding has gone from £220 million to £394 million, which will help an additional 40,000 people; and £500 million has been set aside to tackle homelessness during this Parliament.

The key is that we recognise in the review the further opportunities for joined-up working. We set the ball rolling with the joint work and health unit, using the brightest people in the DWP and the Department of Health and looking at what opportunities are available. I have seen those at first hand. I have visited Foxes Academy, a former hotel in Bridgwater, which, for the first two years, supports young adults with learning disabilities progressively to improve their independent living opportunities. It also works with local employers to create real, tangible job outcomes. In this country, if someone has a learning disability, they typically have a 6% chance of a meaningful career, yet through its supported housing and independent living and training provision, 80% of its students find a career. That should not be best practice or something happening in an isolated place; it should be an absolute given. It is right, therefore, that we take the time to talk to the huge range of experts out there. In my own constituency, I saw Voyage Care, and in Cheltenham the Leonard Cheshire homes, where there is a focus on quality of life, providing entertainment and supporting people in any way possible to give them the things that we take for granted.

I finish with a plea. The welcome introduction of the national living wage impacts on a huge number of staff providing this vital care. We need to make sure that the funding is in place so that we continue to get the best staff into these jobs.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Before we continue with the debate, I have to announce the results of today’s two deferred Divisions. In respect of the motion relating to climate change, the Ayes were 312 and the Noes were 56, so the Question was agreed to. In respect of the motion relating to climate change, the Ayes were 310 and the Noes were 206, so the Question was agreed to.

[The Division lists are published at the end of today’s debates.]
been diagnosed with incurable cancer. He took the decision to remain there. He told me that he loved his mum and dad, but that this was the first time in his life that he had been the adult and not the child. I saw what a difference this made to that young man's friendships, to his family and to his perspective on life.

Supported accommodation is provided for former members of the armed forces—people who have served this country and given everything for our security. I cannot believe that we are even contemplating making it that much harder for them to access the specialist housing support that some of them need. Even the thought of such a proposal shames me, and I think it would shame this entire House if we were to proceed down that route.

There is also specialist accommodation and refuges for victims of domestic violence. I worked in a London local authority as head of education, and we established a crisis team to help primary schools and primary children in crisis. We met every week and had at least 10 child cases every week. In 100% of those cases over two years, domestic violence was a feature. I think it is shameful; it is the hidden scourge of this country. We should talk about it more. The very idea of making it a little harder for those sorts of people to have a bit of security and a place of safety pays no credit to any of us. All those people have one thing in common: life happened to them; they did not do this themselves. We are all going to get older; we have all got older parents; we are all going to need this sort of thing in the future.

A number of principles have emerged from today's debate. Clearly, it is going to be a huge expense if these provisions become unsustainable. It is going to cost the health service; it will cost the legal service; it will cost our prison service. It will be picked up by the public purse. It will cost a hell of a lot more, but it will be nowhere near as good as the provision we have now. We all recognise that Ministers need to look at the position quickly and make a decision. These provisions need to be sustained; they should be there for the people who need them. Frankly, these are the most vulnerable people in our society, whom all of us came to this place to support. Let us not be part of the problem for these people; let us be part of the solution.

2.53 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass).

Let me start by saying how disappointed I am by the wording of the Opposition motion. Supported housing is such an important issue that prejudging the outcome of the review, with words that are inaccurate at best and aimed at scaring vulnerable people at worst, is just plain wrong. It is wrong to say “that the Government intends to cut housing benefit for vulnerable people in specialist housing”.

when what is happening in reality is that a review of supported housing is taking place, and that while that review is taking place, supported housing is exempt from housing benefit changes and exempt from rent reduction changes that are coming in for general needs housing.

Opposition Members do not have a monopoly of being supporters of supported housing. I have seen at first hand the difference that such housing can make to people's lives. As a board member of BHT Sussex, I saw teams on the ground that were supporting people who were going through rehab for alcohol and drug addiction. The supported housing they were provided with not only turned their lives around, but gave them their independence and gave their families their lives back too. Having that supported housing with the input of specialist staff helping to get them clean makes such a difference. It is indeed life changing.

I have seen from my time as a local council cabinet member for housing how sheltered housing with specialist help allowed older people to live independent, healthier lives, which is a view shared by the much proclaimed National Housing Federation as well as the Homes and Communities Agency. In fact, the HCA found that supported housing provision has a net positive benefit of £640 million for UK taxpayers because it reduces hospital admissions, speeds up discharges and improves health outcomes.

Supported housing can transform the lives of young people, too. In my constituency, the Newhaven Foyer is there for young people who have probably had the worst start in life that could be imagined. These are young people whose families have either put them in care or are no longer around to support them. They live in very challenging times, and many have been excluded from school. Being in supported housing means that they not only have a roof over their heads, but that for the first time many of them feel that they have some stability. They have someone there who will make sure that they get up in the morning and go to college or to work, someone who will teach them how to cook and how to maintain a tenancy, and someone who helps them to budget so that when they leave the foyer, they can start an independent life.

I attended one of the Saturday coffee mornings at the Newhaven Foyer and met a young person who told me that if it were not for the foyer, she would actively go out and commit crime to get into prison so that she could have a roof over her head and a hot meal every day. That is the difference that supported housing can make; it transforms lives.

I welcome this review, but the fear—real or unreal—of potential housing allowance caps being applied to residents in supported housing or of the application of the 1% rent reduction is causing unease in the sector. If these were to happen, it would create doubt in the sector about building new provision. As a country, we cannot afford not to provide the extra support that goes with keeping an elderly person living in sheltered housing or a young care leaver or a person going through rehab as a recovering alcoholic or ex-drug addict.

I am optimistic that we will find a solution. I believe that the reply to the Adjournment debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) by the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), was excellent. He said he saw “a very positive future where high quality supported housing is there to provide the right support at the right time.”—[Official Report, 12 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 272WH.]
I urge Ministers to ensure not only that funding is secured for supported housing, but that we reach a timely conclusion when the results of the review are revealed.

This has been a wasted opportunity. If this debate had been about supported housing and the available options to be fed into the review, I might have been able to support the motion. It has, however, provided an opportunity for scaremongering, so I shall vote against it.

2.57 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this debate, and pleased that this has been selected as a topic by the Opposition Front-Bench team.

The planned local housing allowance cap is a real concern for many of my constituents, and I have been contacted by Nottingham City Homes, by Nottingham Community Housing Association and by Framework on behalf of their tenants. Supported housing provides essential accommodation for people who need it. It is already more cost-effective than the alternatives of nursing homes, care homes or hospital beds, and it is far better than people trying to live independently without the support that makes it possible.

The Government’s plans will force the closure of tens of thousands of supported homes for vulnerable and older people. In Nottingham, there are 3,491 supported living bed spaces, with 2,393 spaces for older people. Nick Murphy, chief executive of Nottingham City Homes, told me:

“We are worried about some of our older residents whose combined rent and service charges take them above the Local Housing Allowance threshold. The limits take no account whatsoever of the cost of housing management services that we provide to keep our tenants living independently.”

City Homes has estimated that tenants will be capped in 20% of its supported living schemes, totalling 380 properties. The weekly shortfalls in housing benefit will be between £5 and £21, and 102 of the tenants in those schemes to be capped are over 80 years old.

The Government tell us that the driver behind much of the so-called welfare reform programme is to get people into work, but these are not people who can easily go out and get a job. Providers tell me that poverty or rent arrears are more likely outcomes, and that for some there is a risk that they will move into more expensive care homes, which will actually place a greater burden on already overstretched public sector budgets. Sheltered housing for older people is not just good value for money; it allows people to live independently and with dignity. Demographic projections point in only one direction, but the uncertainty surrounding the future funding of such accommodation is now preventing much needed new developments from going ahead.

In May, I went to see the work that Nottingham Community housing association does for some of my most vulnerable constituents. Stephanie Lodge offers accommodation to adults who need a short period of intensive support after a stay in a psychiatric ward. It is a unique and innovative service. Not only does it enable people to rebuild their lives in the community, but it is financially sustainable. Residents pay a weekly rent of £185; support costs vary, but the average is £396 per person per week. Rethink Mental Illness estimates that it costs £350 per day to support someone in a psychiatric in-patient bed. Stephanie Lodge is not only cost-effective, but gives vulnerable people an opportunity to live in the community with the right support, in some cases for the first time in their lives.

Framework housing association has also contacted me expressing concern about the Government’s proposals. It is dedicated to helping homeless people, preventing homelessness, and promoting opportunities for vulnerable and excluded people. Andrew Redfern, its chief executive, told me:

“In a nutshell, it means that most—if not all—of existing supported housing will cease to be viable from April 2018.”

At a time when single homelessness and rough sleeping are rising fast, that is very serious. We must contemplate a situation in which thousands of people at risk of homelessness, some of whom have multiple and complex needs, will simply have nowhere to go. There will also be a negative impact on rates of hospital discharge and prison resettlement, on care leavers, on survivors of domestic abuse, and on the transforming care programme. Framework is especially concerned about the fact that we have already lost services following the demise of the Supporting People programme, but that is nothing to what will happen in April 2018 if these proposals go ahead.

Of the 1,200 supported housing units currently provided by Framework for people with mental health, alcohol and substance-related problems in Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Derbyshire, fewer than 150 will remain, and that will have an impact on people with real needs. I heard from a service user who said that she had been in genuine crisis and had even nearly lost her life, but that, thanks to Framework, she had managed to turn her life around.

I ask the Minister to listen. If she would like to join me in visiting any of the excellent services in my constituency, I should be delighted to take her to see the invaluable work that they do. The Government must rethink their proposals, rather than seeking to target those who are least able to bear the burden.

3.2 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) has already pointed out, we should not be having a debate on this subject today. It is only right and proper for the review that the debate is all about to be allowed to run its course and to be conducted properly, even if that takes some time. I know that Opposition Members do not like the concept, but in my opinion it is the best approach for long-term stability in the sector.

Jess Phillips: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maggie Throup: I want to make some progress.

Too often, we view one cost in isolation, and we often view one policy in isolation as well. Two Departments are working together on this policy, which I think is definitely the right approach, but we need to do even more of that joined-up policy making. Yesterday, NHS England published its implementation plan for the mental
health five year forward view. The costs of mental ill health—to the individuals concerned, their families or carers, the NHS, and society more widely—are huge. It is not uncommon for mental health problems to result in homelessness, and a subsequent need for supported housing to put people back on track.

A great example of supported housing working well is the Canaan Trust, based in my constituency. It is a Christian charity which provides safe, secure and healthy supported accommodation for homeless males aged between 16 and 54, often giving them the fresh start in life that they never expected to have. It provides 247 support, with staff permanently on site. I have seen for myself how person-centred its support is, with a tailored approach for each individual. The team at the Canaan Trust makes everyone feel special, and that is probably a feeling that they have not experienced for a very long time.

Yesterday I chatted to the key man at the Canaan Trust, Kevin Curtis. His enthusiasm is infectious. Indeed, he managed to persuade quite a few of us—including me and the leader of the council—to sleep out in February and March to raise money for the charity, and I can tell the House that at two o’clock in the morning the pavements in Long Eaton get really hard and cold!

Kevin told me what happens when supported housing is not available. It is a revolving door. Vulnerable people, many of whom have addiction problems, are housed in sub-standard accommodation in communities where the temptation of drink and drugs is around every corner. Inevitably, eight out of 10 find themselves back on the streets within three to six months—and all because there is no one there to watch their backs, and to provide the extra guidance and support that makes all the difference. We fail as a society if we do not stop those people falling through the net, and I urge the new Minister to make that one of her top priorities.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady’s constituency is near mine: we are both in the Nottinghamshire-Derbyshire area. As she knows, providers such as Framework, which does fantastic work on supported housing, have made real efforts to provide help for the most vulnerable. Should this not be a cross-party issue? Should not those in all corners of the House press the Government to change their position and do the right thing?

Maggie Throup: I entirely agree. That is why the review is so important. We need to reach out to organisations to find out what is needed and will be sustainable for the future.

The extra support that is provided by such organisations, including charities like the Canaan Trust, means that for their clients the outcome is a very different story from the revolving door that sends eight out of 10 back on to the streets. Just 2% of their clients go through that revolving door, which is a huge reduction. That, along with other evidence of good outcomes, shows just how important it is for supported housing to be available to the most vulnerable people. It should also be borne in mind that this is not just about the costs associated with the type of provision found at the Canaan Trust; it is also about the savings made for the NHS, the police and other support agencies.

Let me end by reminding Opposition Members that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) mentioned earlier, it was this Conservative Government who, in the 2015 autumn statement, committed £40 million to services for victims of domestic abuse, three times as much as had been provided in the previous four years. I am proud of that.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): At the beginning of her speech, the hon. Lady said that the review should run its course. People running domestic violence refuges in my constituency are desperately worried that those refuges will not be there by the time the review has run its course. What advice would the hon. Lady give them, and the desperate women and children who need their help?

Maggie Throup: I think it is important that the Government have already put more money into support for domestic abuse victims.

Julian Knight: Should it not also be recognised that we will reach a decision in the early autumn?

Maggie Throup: I completely agree. As I said earlier, we need to come up with the right decisions and produce sustainable outcomes. There is no point in a review that does not get to the bottom of the issue.

I am also proud that this Government have actively helped people with disabilities—and those are the people we are talking about: people with disabilities, and people who are particularly vulnerable—to play their part in our communities. In the last two years alone, 365,000 disabled people have moved into employment, and I am definitely proud of that.

3.9 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Thank you for calling me, Mr Deputy Speaker. You never fail apart, in any circumstances.

I welcome all interventions from Members who know more about this issue than I do. My feelings about it are no secret. The Minister has stood on many platforms with me, and it is a delight to see her on the Front Bench. I will talk mainly about refuge accommodation for victims of domestic and sexual violence. However, I am also talking about all sorts of supported accommodation.

I have spoken in every debate on this issue, and I have asked the Prime Minister, every single time I have had an opportunity, to do something about it. So far I am still waiting. However, that Prime Minister is yesterday’s man, and now I look to the words of today’s woman, and I am pleased to say that I do not have to look very far to find affirmation that the new Prime Minister in fact agrees with me. In the “Violence against Women and Girls Strategy 2016-2020” published by her Home Office, she stated that we must “ensure all victims get the right support at the right time”.

Let me be clear today: unless the Government exempt refugees from local housing allowance caps to housing benefit, victims of domestic violence, rape and abuse will have no chance of getting what the Prime Minister describes as the “right support at the right time”.

Julian Knight: It is interesting to hear that.

Maggie Throup: I entirely agree. That is why the review is so important. We need to reach out to organisations to find out what is needed and will be sustainable for the future.

The extra support that is provided by such organisations, including charities like the Canaan Trust, means that for their clients the outcome is a very different story from the revolving door that sends eight out of 10 back on to the streets. Just 2% of their clients go through that revolving door, which is a huge reduction. That, along with other evidence of good outcomes, shows just how important it is for supported housing to be available to the most vulnerable people. It should also be borne in mind that this is not just about the costs associated with the type of provision found at the Canaan Trust; it is also about the savings made for the NHS, the police and other support agencies.
In the same strategy document, the right hon. Lady heralds the money that everybody keeps going on about—I have heard many Members singing its praises today—but it is a tiny fraction of the picture. Government money allocated for refuge funding is always short-term. Despite all the talk of sustainability, it is never there; it never has been there and it is never built in. I know that because I have helped to write all the bids for all the money that everybody in the Chamber is talking about, and in every single bid for refuge services in this country, the sustainability plan was based on housing benefit. Many refuges rely entirely on housing benefit.

Oliver Colvile: Is the hon. Lady aware that Devon and Cornwall police have been doing an enormous amount of work on refuges and abuse through an initiative called Operation Encompass? If she is not aware of it, would she like to come down to Plymouth? I would love to help her to make that visit.

Jess Phillips: As we enter the summer recess, I would love a little trip to Cornwall. I hasten to add that police forces across the country are doing really quite good work, as are police and crime commissioners, but I am afraid to say that I have never seen an example of their funding supported accommodation.

It would be dishonest now for Ministers to undermine their own work—Ministers of this Government signed it off when they allocated the money; they are all happy to stand up and sing its praises—because every single plan had housing benefit within it.

It is complicated and difficult for people to understand what running a refuge actually looks like. The grants the Government give are what we use to pay for staff. They are used to pay for family support workers, who enable a child to re-engage with a mother who has lost all control over her children because a perpetrator has taken it from her. They allow key staff to give counselling and support to women who have been brutally raped, beaten, kept locked away and controlled to a degree that no one in this Chamber could ever imagine. That is what the grants from the Government pay for. What pays for the nuts and bolts, the beds, the buildings, the places where people live, their homes and their security is housing benefit.

Andrew Gwyne: My hon. Friend is making a compelling case. May I take her back to the letter I received from New Charter housing that I referred to in an intervention on our Front-Bench spokesman? It says to me:

“It is probable that the result of this reduction will be either; additional cost to the public purse where there individuals take up, for example, valuable and costly hospital space; or these individuals find themselves living in totally inappropriate accommodation that does not support their needs and puts them at high risk.”

Is that not exactly the case we are making today?

Jess Phillips: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and that is exactly the case. As has been outlined, the reduction will result in people being left in the accommodation of unscrupulous housing providers where we do not want people to end up, and I am sure every single Member knows about these providers.

Housing benefit currently pays for things such as CCTV, security support and all the extra stuff that we perhaps take for granted because we do not have it in our homes—but then we have not been repeatedly raped for the past six months of our life. That is what housing benefit pays for. I cannot say this with any more dramatic effect: half of the bed spaces in the refuges where I worked would not be there without housing benefit. Already, 115 women and their children are turned away from refuges every single day in this country. Already this year, 50 women are dead.

There are also very real concerns about the mooted housing benefit changes for those aged 18 to 21. Perhaps the Minister could update the House on that, and the bearing it will have on a place like Birmingham, where 25% of the women living in refuges last year came from this age group. Ministers will be switching off the route to safety for these women if the changes in housing benefit come in, and I am at a loss as to what is going on—whether that is part of this review or was just something floated around.

If the DWP does not want to play its part and the Treasury values its bottom line so much, the Government must look at a different approach to funding refuges and other supported accommodation. This review is not about sustainability; it is about cutting costs.

The decimation of local authority Supporting People budgets has already led to the closure of more than 30 refuges in the UK. I am not just shouting or shrouding or scaremongering against cuts; I am willing to engage with Ministers across Government to talk about other sustainability models for refuges. I have just a few suggestions for today. We could ring-fence national budgets, and make providing accommodation for victims a local authority statutory duty. At the moment local authorities have that duty only for adult services, children’s services and bins. I think providing a safe place for children who have been raped to live is more important than the bins.

The model of commissioning that the Home Office has used for accommodating victims of modern slavery completely eliminates the need for housing benefit, and I have set up refuges for victims of trafficking with this model. No housing benefit changes hands. We could only do that because this Government—the Government in front of me—recognise the importance of a national funding framework.

I am happy to work with the Government on any of those solutions, but to pull the rug from underneath refuges, homeless hostels and older people’s care services without first putting in place a system that will work and is sustainable and offers a future for these victims is both stupid and cruel.

So let me go back to the words of the Prime Minister. She said that “awareness of” and “response to” violence against women and girls was “everyone’s business”. Will the Minister promise to make it hers?

3.16 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): There is a clear need to get the cost of housing benefits under control, but it is also vital that the needs of the most vulnerable are met. These costs have continued to rise, even at times when the number of people receiving housing benefits has reduced. Unless the spiralling cost can be
controlled, the system would soon become unviable, severely limiting our ability to support many of the people who need our help the most.

All parts of the housing market that receive public funding must bear a share of the need for greater efficiency, and supported housing is no different. However, we must also recognise that providing supported housing involves additional costs. Many of those additional costs might in the past have been covered through social services, rather than through housing benefits, but if changes to housing benefits are not implemented in the right way, many of the existing supported housing facilities would be seriously threatened.

I would like to thank the former Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), for the positive and constructive way in which he responded to concerns raised by me and other Members. The Government’s review of supported housing is a welcome opportunity to review this crucial issue, and I welcome this opportunity to give voice again to some of the issues that I hope the review will consider.

I would like to talk about one of my constituents, a Black Country Housing Group tenant who has had her life transformed thanks to first-class supported housing. DW was diagnosed with a learning disability and schizophrenia at the age of seven. She is also partially sighted due to cataracts in both eyes. At the age of 14 her mother died, but DW continued to live at home until her father also died. DW became a hoarder and was suffering from self-neglect; she was very isolated, did not socialise and became very aggressive. In March 2013, DW became very ill and was taken to hospital, where she stayed for one month. After a stay in a re-enablement centre, DW moved into Chapel Street, Black Country Housing Group’s supported living service. Here, she was provided with excellent support, with personal care, social interaction and peer support from other residents, as well as from a team of skilled, experienced support workers.

Through a working knowledge of DW and of her anxieties and needs, the staff worked with health professionals to deliver a support plan and to ensure that she got appropriate ongoing treatment for her eyes. I am pleased to say that she is now much happier, her mental health has improved dramatically and she is able to get involved in her community. She maintains her home and her tenancy, she undertakes household duties in the home and she is no longer at risk of self-neglect or homelessness. As a result of supported housing, DW has become much more independent, aware and involved.

DW’s case is just one of any number that I could have picked, but it clearly illustrates all the work and additional costs that come with providing that level of care, and that must be recognised through the social care and welfare systems. It does not really matter whether the higher costs intrinsic to effective supported housing continue to be funded from the housing budget or whether they are funded through social services. What matters is that those costs are very real and very necessary and that they must be met. I wholeheartedly support the review of supported housing and the commitment to a permanent funding solution for supported housing. We must continue to do what we can to reduce the spiralling costs of housing benefit bills, but we must make sure that the vital services provided to vulnerable people such as DW in my constituency can continue, and that means finding a way to pay for them.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): I am pleased that there is consensus across the House on the importance of supported housing to people in all our communities. We must all show our appreciation of the hard work and dedication of the staff of the charities and housing associations involved. We need to give them the respect they deserve. They do a difficult job, dealing with people with many challenges, and they do it in a positive way.

There has been a cloud over supported housing for some time, with shrinking budgets and uncertainty in welfare policy. These problems have come to a head with the Government’s proposed local housing allowance cap. Although the Government have already had the good sense to delay the implementation of that measure for supported housing, we know that housing associations have already had to factor the proposed changes into their budgets, and that they are now set to be introduced in April 2018. According to the respected National Housing Federation, this means that a staggering 41% of existing supported housing and sheltered accommodation places will be shut. Where will those people go?

I was recently invited to visit Bramwell House, a shelter for the homeless in Blackburn managed by the Salvation Army, a well respected organisation. It helps and supports homeless people by providing accommodation and floating support to those who need it most. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who is no longer in his place, spoke of the most vulnerable in Tory housing policies. I have to tell the House that the Salvation Army is not scaremongering; it is scared that it will no longer be able to provide the services that we know are desperately needed.

Bramwell House provides a safe and warm place to stay for people who would otherwise be sleeping rough. The services that it offers give some of the most vulnerable in Blackburn a life chance and an opportunity to change their outlook for the better. The main group of people who look to Bramwell House for support are single homeless people with support needs. Over the past 12 months, 413 residents have been supported there, and 83% of its residents have moved into other more suitable accommodation, which is a truly exceptional record. However, the benefits are so much more than simply offering a place to stay. Bramwell House helps to reduce rough sleeping, involvement in crime, reliance on the health system and demand for other social services in our community, and I find it regrettable that such places find themselves in peril because of short-termism in Tory housing policies.

Some may ask why supported housing should be exempt from the cap. In my opinion, it should be exempt because of the extra costs that are essential to providing the service. Many shelters need to provide staff 24/7, in order to offer real support to deal with the challenges facing these vulnerable people—something that I hope no one in this House will ever have to face. It is essential that the Government do all they can to ensure a future for Bramwell House and similar projects across the country. Homeless people’s futures should not be decided according to the whim of a Department for Work and Pensions that is dead set on cutting the housing benefit bill at all costs. So I hope that the new Secretary of State will look at this with fresh eyes and
support the Prime Minister’s statement that this Tory Government are going to have a social conscience. I look forward to seeing the benefits of that.

I look forward to seeing fairness, and to seeing the Secretary of State introducing a long-term funding package so that supported housing schemes do not have to exist month to month or year to year. If the Government take steps to support supported housing, the providers will be able to focus on their great work of providing somewhere warm and safe to sleep, helping the vulnerable to live independently and, crucially, giving homeless people a chance to turn their lives around for the better.

3.26 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Supported housing provides a hugely valuable service to many of our most vulnerable citizens: elderly people in need of care; vulnerable young people who need support and supervision; those fleeing domestic abuse or recovering from addiction; and more besides. The different types of supported accommodation are as varied as those who need them, ranging from hostels and refuges to more specialised residential units built around the specific needs of their residents. What they have in common is that they provide people with not only a safe place to live but a platform from which to embark on a more empowered, independent life than their circumstances might otherwise allow.

I iterate these points in order to make it absolutely clear that the Government’s approach to the supported housing sector is rooted in a deep appreciation of the help that it provides for the vulnerable and an understanding of the challenges that it faces. The Solihull Care Centre, an organisation in my constituency that assists and represents carers, told me recently that some of its members were worried by the uncertainty created by the current one-year delay in the implementation of some of the coalition’s planned reforms to funding. I note that there are no Liberal Democrat Members in the Chamber taking part in the debate today.

The entire reason for the delay in implementing the proposals outlined in the coalition paper is to allow proper time to examine the concerns expressed by other parts of the sector about their impact. It would be wrong to proceed without paying careful attention to those on the frontline. The Government must weigh the arguments of any lobby against the wider needs of the nation and the public purse. We cannot abandon the reform effort. I feel that the wisest course of action was to delay the changes while the sector’s concerns are explored and examined in detail. I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State commit today to reach a final decision in the early autumn. I will be writing to the Solihull Carers Centre on my return to the office to let it know that timeline.

Complications are part of what makes reform so daunting, and sticking with an unsustainable status quo is always tempting. It is too often easier to patch and mend, to avoid the hassle and to pass the problem on to the next generation of politicians. I am proud to be part of a reforming Government that have led a decisive break with the buck-passing of the past. Government Members recognise that only by adapting to changing circumstances do we make sure that such important institutions are maintained for the future.

Bringing down the welfare bill is essential if we are not to pass on an unsustainable debt to our children. Let us not forget that it was under Labour that housing benefit ballooned into one of the largest and fastest-growing parts of our welfare system. At the start of this year, the annual cost stood at a staggering £25 billion—more than we spend on roads, the police, and equipping the military put together and equivalent to about 8p on income tax. Our reforms recognise that the old system had become overly complicated to administer and contained blind spots as a result of how it classified landlords, for example. It would also have become increasingly incompatible with the changing landscape of welfare provision as other reforms, such as universal credit and individual budgets, come into force.

I am confident, particularly after listening to the Secretary of State today, that the Government will move forward after the current review with proposals that will provide security to tenants, certainty for providers, value for money to taxpayers, and a sense of fairness to renters in the unsupported housing sector.

3.30 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight). He claims that the Government’s approach is rooted in a deep appreciation of the help that supported housing gives to many of the most vulnerable. That certainly was not a characteristic of the Chancellor’s decision in November, but we look forward to it being a characteristic of the decisions taken by the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the new Chancellor this autumn. I applaud my hon. Friends the Members for Easington (Grahame M. Morris) and for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for joining forces in this debate—just as I did with our hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) in January in a similar debate on a motion in similar terms to try to defend supported housing from some crude, across-the-board cuts that put its very future in jeopardy.

Those cuts were announced by the previous Chancellor in last November’s autumn statement. The Government Front-Bench team keep on saying that they do not want to rush the decision, but that was the decision that was taken. It was wrong and was taken with no consultation, no evidence, no impact assessment and no warning. The previous Chancellor said that “housing benefit in the social sector will be capped at the relevant local housing allowance.”—[Official Report, 25 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1360.]

With one short sweeping sentence, he put at risk almost all specialist housing for the frail elderly, the homeless, young children and people leaving care, people with dementia, people with mental illness or learning disabilities, people fleeing domestic violence and some of our veterans. The Secretary of State’s predecessor, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), either did not spot it or did not stop it, but either way the Chancellor completely ignored him last year. One of the tests for the new Secretary of State will be whether he can get the Chancellor to reverse the decision and to make a different one.

The purpose of my publicly exposing the problems with the housing benefit cut in December, calling the debate in this House in January, visiting many of the most vulnerable at-risk schemes across the country

\[Kate Hollern\]
Throughout February, and making a Budget submission to the Chancellor in March remains the same as it was back then: to give voice to the hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people whose homes have been put at risk by the decision taken in the autumn statement and to highlight the warnings and the evidence of organisations that have the facts and will have to deal with the consequences. They are providers that the public respects and trusts, such as Women’s Aid, Mencap, Age UK and the Salvation Army.

I also want to press the case, as the motion does, for a full exemption of all supported and sheltered housing from these crude, across-the-board cuts. The Secretary of State’s words and tone were welcome today, but the test will be whether he can deliver a change of decision come the autumn. He said that the issues are important, sensitive and hugely difficult. He said that he was prepared to listen carefully to the sector, which we welcome. He also acknowledged that this sector transforms lives. In Rotherham, Target Housing does just that with people coming out of prison and the penal system, and Rush House does just that with vulnerable young people, often needing somewhere safe and a roof over their head and then the chance to be able to live independently. Together, those two organisations look after over 100 vulnerable people, but they say that they will be losing out by £8,000 a week and will have to close their doors and their schemes, leaving the people with nowhere else to go.

So I say to the Secretary of State that the review in the early autumn is fine, but that was started in 2014. We were told that it would report by the end of March, but it did not. It was nine months too late then, and by early autumn it will be 12 months too late for the decision that has already been taken. The test now is: can he produce this review in time for the next autumn statement, because he missed the last autumn statement? The real test will not be whether he can publish this evidence review, but whether he can get the change of decision that hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable people in this country desperately want to hear from this Government.

3.35 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who has much experience in these matters. It is clear from all the remarks made this afternoon that everyone in this House supports supported housing. One of the most inspirational parts of our job is visiting organisations such as Ryedale YMCA in Malton, Yorkshire Housing, North Yorkshire County Council and its facilities, and Arc Light in York, which are all helping vulnerable people to get back on their feet.

Interestingly, at Ryedale YMCA about £83 a week is allocated for accommodation for the young people it supports but we are talking about £111 for the support costs. If this local housing allowance cap did apply to this sector, that facility, like many others, would have to close. I know the Government accept this position; I have written many letters to them and they absolutely understand the need. I do, however, support their policy review in this area. Housing benefit in the social sector has reached £13.2 billion, which represents a 25% rise over the past 10 years. It is right to review spending, not only to make sure that taxpayers’ money is spent wisely, but to look for sustainable solutions in a way that protects the most vulnerable.

I accept parts of the motion; yes, supported housing should be exempt from the cap on LHA. I do not, however, accept the motion where it says that “the Government intends to cut housing benefit for vulnerable people”.

That is clearly not the case—or Opposition Members do not know that is the case, as this is subject to a review. They are causing distress to their own constituents.

John Healey: But we do know this. If the hon. Gentleman looks in the Red Book, he will see, scored by the then Chancellor, savings for three years from 2018-19 for this measure on housing benefit of £990 million. We know this. That is the problem, that is the decision and that is what needs to be reversed.

Kevin Hollinrake: But does the right hon. Gentleman accept the number of times it has been said by Ministers that this is subject to a policy review, which is due out in the autumn? Therefore, to say that this is going to happen is absolutely wrong.

I do accept that uncertainty is being caused by this policy decision, and we should think through a policy before we announce it. This does disincentivise investment. The National Housing Federation has said that 1,200 new units are on hold because of this policy—this potential policy. It is vital that we deliver these units to meet the overall need to build more homes. We are building many more homes—the figures are almost double those from 2009. We built 166,000 in the most recent year, whereas 90,000 were built in 2009. We need to get to 250,000 homes a year, but we will do that only by allowing either national Government or local government to build more affordable rented homes. The last time we built 250,000 homes in a year was in 1977, when local authorities built 108,000 homes. We absolutely feel that affordable homes to rent must be part of the solution.

Julian Knight: Does my hon. Friend recognise that the Labour party has nothing to lecture us about on building social housing, as it built next to no social housing in its 13 years in government?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As others want to speak, I will move on to one other point, which is the disincentive for the young people in these facilities, which do a fantastic job. Recently, on a visit to Arc Light in York, I met two young men in their 20s: one was a brickie and the other a joiner. They were perfectly capable of working, but were totally deterred from working, because they felt that if they were in work, they would have to pay the full costs of that accommodation—£250 a week—which is a huge disincentive. That may not be quite true. Lord Freud wrote to the Communities and Local Government Committee for clarification, but the Chair of the Select Committee was not quite clear on the point.

Jess Phillips: From my experience, that is a problem with the current system of housing benefit. It is much harder for people who are in employment to stay in supported accommodation, because they do not qualify for housing benefit at a higher rate. That is something
that absolutely must be sorted out in any system. We are not saying that it is perfect, but that is definitely one of the problems.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am very glad that we agree on that point. The other impression that I got from these young people was that they did not seem to feel any particular urgency to get back into work. We should consider whether we are providing the right incentives and encouragement for these young people, who are perfectly capable of working, to get into work.

In conclusion, I do accept some of the points in the motion, but certainly not all of them, and for that reason, I will be voting against it in the Lobby this evening.

3.41 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) with whom I serve on the Communities and Local Government Committee.

My constituency benefits from a wide and diverse range of supported housing schemes, which play a fundamentally valuable role in enabling people, who would not otherwise be able to do so, to live independently—whether it is for a period of time following a particular trauma such as domestic abuse or for the long term. Supported housing gives people dignity and community. It contributes to the kind of society that we want to be, advances equality and saves the state money.

Among the excellent supported housing in my constituency, we have women’s refuges; housing for blind and partially sighted residents run by Action for Blind People; a foyer run by Centrepoint, which is also very concerned about the withdrawal of housing benefit from 18 to 21-year-olds; an Emmaus community supporting homeless people back into work and permanent accommodation; housing for residents with learning disabilities run by L’Arche and others; extra care housing for older residents, the need for which is growing exponentially; and many others. Each provider has been thrown into turmoil by the proposal to cap housing benefit to the level of the local housing allowance.

Earlier this year, I met a number of housing associations and voluntary sector organisations that provide supported housing in my constituency. Without exception, they expressed their concern about the proposed cap. Housing associations, without exception, said that they would be able to provide less supported housing if the cap is introduced; that they will not invest in new schemes; and that some of them will seek to dispose of existing supported housing schemes. Several said that supported housing was already subsidised by other parts of their business, and others that, while at the moment that covers their own costs, the finances were already very precarious.

The announcement of the review was welcomed, but since then the lack of further clarity and the delay in making a decision has also caused problems. Such is the uncertainty caused by the review that Emmaus, which runs housing for people who were formerly homeless, told me that it is postponing investment decisions and is unsure about whether to continue some of the schemes that it runs. These are homes that people rely on now. The fact that their futures are now in jeopardy underlines the urgency of the situation.

The challenge presented by the introduction of the housing benefit cut to the level of the LHA is further compounded by other changes that have been introduced. The national living wage, while welcome, is not supported by any increase in the funding for providers that will have to implement it, and that is squeezing their finances. Cuts to local authority funding are reducing the extent to which support services are there for those who need them, placing further emphasis on the support directly provided by the providers of supported housing.

The impact of the Housing and Planning Act 2016, not least on the starter homes obligation on local authorities, will reduce the extent to which providers across the social housing sector are able to provide supported housing. Brexit creates further uncertainty for the construction sector, and potentially threatens the ability of housing associations to borrow from the European Investment Bank and other sources at preferential rates, which further damages the ability of the sector to deliver supported housing.

At the time of a Communities and Local Government Committee meeting a few weeks ago, the Minister, Lord Freud, was stuck on a plane, I believe, but his official, Peter Searle, was there to answer questions from the Committee. I asked about the timescale for announcing the outcome of the review on the LHA cap. Peter Searle said that it would be announced before the recess. Will the Minister please explain why this commitment is not being met, and why we are heading into the recess with further uncertainty and turmoil for the supported housing sector?

With the timescale for this review, the Government are treating with contempt a sector which makes nothing but a positive contribution to supporting some of our most vulnerable residents. I hope that, when summing up, the Minister will clarify the timescale for a decision on the review, confirm that the cap will not be implemented as planned, and set out an approach to supporting and investing in supported housing to enable a strong sector to meet current as well as future needs for some of our most vulnerable residents.

3.45 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Over the past few days I have been pondering whether Government reshuffles are frustrating or whether they are an opportunity. Listening to the tone set by the new Secretary of State today, I have settled on opportunity. The topic of this debate offers a huge opportunity to our new Secretary of State, and I also know that they are aware that caps on housing benefit could adversely impact on its provision. I want to press on the Secretary of State today the urgency with which a conclusion must be reached.

When the Government are rightly checking how taxpayers’ money is spent, they must also consider the impact of change on those potentially affected. I believe that the British people trust this Government to be financially prudent, but at the same time they want to see the most vulnerable people in our society protected. In my constituency, I have supported housing schemes looking
after the elderly. I recently visited one of those providers, Moorlands Court in Melbourn. I have rarely seen such high standards of care—supported housing at its most dignified, with medical care and attention provided in a carefully thought-out setting. I am very proud to represent such services.

Cambridge Housing Society knows what it is doing. It also provides housing for vulnerable teenagers and people with learning difficulties. It is not in the sector to make a profit for shareholders. It is fulfilling the needs in my constituency that keep me awake at night. But while the Government undertake their review of the sector and no definitive alternative funding proposals have been outlined, the sector is in a state of paralysis. The cap on housing benefit would mean a loss of £537,000 to CHS alone, and would immediately put four of its schemes into an operating loss. In this vacuum of uncertainty, the sector, which badly needs to grow to fill the demand that we all know exists, stalls. Schemes are not brought forward, investment plans are shelved, places are not offered to the most vulnerable citizens and they suffer.

Delaying the implementation of the housing benefit cap on the sector is welcome, but excessive delay in outlining a new model is damaging. Given that the sector was expecting to hear, I believe, in mid-July I urge the Secretary of State to tell us when in early autumn we will have a decision. If the review can also identify areas of abuse in the system, of course that is welcome, but that should be dealt with separately. The rest of the sector has a job to do and its future plans must not be jeopardised because of the behaviour of a few.

I cannot support the motion today as it is worded, because it asks the Government to exempt supported housing from the housing benefit cap altogether, though I do share some sympathy for that view, and I am pleased that we are having this debate. It seems obvious to me that the Government are seeking an entirely new model to ensure that the sector is well funded for the future, and that may indeed be better, but we must hear it soon. Damage is done to this Government’s reputation when we propose cuts without simultaneously communicating an alternative. Cuts to employment and support allowance for the work-related activity group would be welcome, but that should be dealt with separately. The rest of the sector was expecting to hear, I believe, in mid-July I urge the Secretary of State to tell us when in early autumn we will have a decision. If the review can also identify areas of abuse in the system, of course that is welcome, but that should be dealt with separately. The rest of the sector has a job to do and its future plans must not be jeopardised because of the behaviour of a few.

Whether through a White or Green Paper on disability, or these proposals, we must focus the minds of our Secretary of State and Ministers on communication. Precise deadlines for decisions are important. I urge the Secretary of State to join me in seeing this as an urgent opportunity, not a damaging frustration.

3.49 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Just seven days ago, the new Prime Minister spoke in her inaugural speech about social justice, yet here Opposition Members are, yet again, having to speak out against yet another socially unjust policy proposal from this Government. Cutting housing benefit for the most vulnerable in our society will result in the closure of thousands of supported accommodation units. This is about people’s homes and people’s safety.

When I was a local councillor, two sheltered accommodation complexes for the elderly were earmarked for closure. For a year, I worked with elderly residents to save their homes, and I will never, ever forget the worry and fear etched on their faces, and the many concerns they had. All they could think about was where they would live, how they would afford to move and who they would have for company. When we know that Age UK is reporting that 300,000 elderly people suffer from chronic loneliness, which leads to early death, we see that the social angle this accommodation provides is beyond vital, and I remember the sheer joy and relief when we managed to stop those shelters closing.

Today I am mindful of the fact that we are talking about not just one or two shelters for the elderly closing, but hundreds and potentially thousands. I would like the Minister to tell us where on earth these people will move to if their shelter shuts. Many in constituencies such as mine will not be able to afford private accommodation. Many will have no family to turn to. Thanks to this Government, there is a massive shortage of council housing, forcing these people into residential care homes or into the health service, which is not fit for their needs or appropriate for them, particularly in the long term. That leaves only one option: homelessness.

Yet this policy will see the closure of homeless hostels too, which can mean only one other choice: to go on to the streets. Surely the Government can see that if they push ahead with this change, there will be no charities and services they can push this problem on to, because cutting this money is cutting those very services.

Earlier this year, I had the huge privilege of spending time with Terry Waite CBE. Many may not know this, but this towering, kind, humble man, known for the horrific captivity he endured in Lebanon, is president of Emmaus UK, which was referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). Emmaus provides homes and work for people who have experienced homelessness, and it is due to open a site in my constituency. It provides a tried and tested, lasting route out of homelessness. It also generates £6 million per year in savings to the state, through reductions in offending and the improved use of health services. However, it has told me that if housing benefit for supported accommodation is capped nationally at LHA rates, it would lose over £3 million per year, threatening most of its communities with closure.

Peter Aldous: I, too, have visited an Emmaus community. Does the hon. Lady agree that Emmaus does great work? For every £1 the state puts in, Emmaus produces a social return of £11. Does she agree that it is vital that the new system we come up with acts as a catalyst for that type of inward investment?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: What is vital is that this proposal is scrapped, so that the Emmaus community in my constituency can be built, and all the people living in the other communities are not faced with being pushed back on the streets because their community has closed down.

Those who have experienced the horror and degradation of being homeless and on the streets could find themselves right back there if this policy goes through. This is just poor economics, and it is beyond contemptible. I am completely aghast as to why any Government would want to introduce a policy that would see our elderly,
our care leavers, those with mental health and learning difficulties, our veterans and victims of domestic violence on the streets, and that would keep those who are already homeless there too. If this policy is introduced, people will be destitute.

Earlier the Secretary of State said that, despite people being in enduring limbo, it will be autumn before we have an announcement. I hope that that means the Government are slowly beginning to understand at last that regressive policies such as this, punitive benefits sanctions and the bedroom tax only create more problems for our society and will cost the Government a hell of a lot more in the long run.

3.54 pm

**Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab):** The Government’s proposals to cap housing benefit at the level of local housing allowance will severely damage supported housing across the country, including in my constituency. We have 605 units of supported housing for vulnerable people who are suffering from mental ill health and learning disabilities and who are victims of abuse and addiction. There are also 2,070 units of housing for older people. Those high numbers were set to become even higher, but the plan to build a further 500 units was stopped. The day after a debate in January in which I raised the issue in this Chamber, and a DCLG official made contact to see what help could be given to prevent the plan from being stopped.

Behind every one of those high numbers is a person or family with their own individual story. I recently had the pleasure of visiting the residents of two supported housing schemes in St Helens. Salisbury House is run by the Salvation Army and provides accommodation for 48 single, homeless men, including veterans. Some have served time in prison, some suffer from addiction and some have experienced family breakdown and ended up on the streets. As well as being given a place to stay, residents are offered support and advice in a range of areas to help them to break the cycle of homelessness. That includes advice on housing, benefits, education, life skills, work experience, money management and accessing other agencies, including rehabilitation services, and help to make and build a home for themselves. In other words, these men receive help to get their lives back on track and to resume their place as full and functioning members of society.

That sort of holistic approach is the proven route to defeating homelessness, as it gives people the power to take control of their own lives and to make the necessary changes for them to get back on track, keeping them off the streets and away from crime. The project will cease to exist if housing benefit is capped at the level of local housing allowance. The cost will transfer to the national health service, the criminal justice system and social services, because people need support.

Parr Mount Court is a residential home for 97 elderly people, 33 of whom are supported by Making Space, which is registered with the Care Quality Commission. Most of the residents that I met were elderly people. St Helens is different, in that its elderly population is set to rise by a massive 14.5% by 2020. Some years ago, we did a survey of elderly people, asking them what they wanted. They said that they did not want to go into residential accommodation and that they wanted to stay at home, but they could not do so because they did not have the support. We set out to build villages of extra care housing, both sheltered and supported, but every one of them will cease if the Government’s proposals go ahead.

The St Helens benefits team tells me that £4.96 million a year will be scrapped and will not come to St Helens if the proposals go ahead. That money provides the care we need to keep people in their own independent homes, rather than them having to go into residential homes or even ending up in the NHS.

I want to talk about a young man with mental health issues. His family could not support him and he was being supported at one of the 19 units of supported housing that we have for such situations. He needed national healthcare, but the only place that could be offered was in Germany. I raised the issue with a former Minister—since last week, he is no longer in post. He did his best, but could not come up with any other place. If the proposals go ahead, the young man will not even have sheltered support. We know that we do not have NHS mental health provision, and we are taking away the only provision available. The situation really needs to be looked at carefully.

There are many care leavers in St Helens and we provide them with a home and support because they do not have mums and dads or a family network to support them and help them to build a home.

I ask the Government to speed up the process, but to also consider carefully the damage that is going to be done to society and where the cost is going to be picked up. There are no beds available in our hospitals in the north-west, and there is no money available for social services. I ask the Government to be speedy, to do it carefully and to consider the people affected.

3.59 pm

**Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Marie Rimmer) and my constituency neighbour the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen). I am sure the hon. Lady agrees with me when I say that housing in Cambridge is now fearsomely expensive. The price of a terraced house in Cambridge is almost £500,000, and the average rent is twice that in the rest of England. The Office for National Statistics tells us that house prices in Cambridge have risen faster than anywhere else in the country since the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats formed their unholy alliance.

People are increasingly locked out of the housing market and the private rented sector, and it is against that backdrop that the brave people trying to provide sheltered housing in an expensive city such as Cambridge have to operate. They do not pull their punches when asked about the current situation. I went to see one of the excellent Metropolitan’s housing schemes a few weeks ago, and it was inspiring. It was exactly the kind of scheme that every Member of the House would be proud our country is promoting. What did it tell me? It told me it could not do it now—it could not do something similar again—because of the uncertainty it faces.
The hon. Lady has already mentioned the excellent Cambridge Housing Society Group. It has a scheme just up the road from where I live in Cambridge, and I was there at the weekend to celebrate 25 years of its excellent nursery scheme. It runs supported housing schemes as well, and its brilliant chief executive, Nigel Howlett—he will have had the same conversation with the hon. Lady as he has had with me—is absolutely clear about the impact: schemes it wanted to implement are on hold. As has been said, the potential loss to the Cambridge Housing Society is over £500,000, with four schemes absolutely at risk.

I was very impressed by the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who is no longer in her seat, and I suspect the local authority of every Member in the House has the same set of examples. Cambridge City Council manages more than 100 units of accommodation for homeless households, including three hostels, 22 units of move-on accommodation for adults recovering from mental health conditions, and 13 sheltered housing schemes for older people, with more than 460 tenancies. The council tells me that all those rely on this income. In a high-cost city like Cambridge, the inevitable consequence of the changes is that it will have to make more cuts. As has been said, that means fewer wardens, less support and less preventive work to stop people going to the national health service, which is of course tremendously overburdened.

As we have heard from Members on both sides of the House, there is a problem, and I urge the Government to think hard about it. We have a new Prime Minister, who has made her point about social justice, and she has a very early opportunity to turn those warm words into action. It really does not have to be that difficult. Please just do it.

4.2 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am pleased to take part in today’s debate, which follows a Westminster Hall debate on refuges in May, when we discussed similar matters. I want to concentrate on the threat that the proposed capping of housing benefit to the local housing allowance rate in the social sector poses to people fleeing violent relationships.

It is clear that this cut will have a devastating impact on the continuing provision of Scottish refuge accommodation. At the moment, with no clarity about when or if the changes will be introduced, we have a new Prime Minister, who has made her point about social justice, and she has a very early opportunity to turn those words into action. It really does not have to be that difficult. Please just do it.

Analysis carried out by Angus Women’s Aid has found that refuge costs are significantly higher than the local housing allowance rate. The examples provided show that annual losses caused by the introduction of the cap will vary from £5,500 to £11,600 a year. The former Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners’ Rights, Alex Neil, said categorically in a letter to the UK Government last February that without the current levels of housing benefit to cover the additional costs, refuges would be forced to close.

Despite the cautious welcome that I and others have given to the Government’s new violence against women and girls strategy that was announced in March, which offered some reassurance about ongoing funding for front-line services, we should not allow ourselves to ignore the challenges that such services face. Women’s Aid has highlighted the funding pressure that the services are under and warned that lives will be lost unless a more secure and long-term funding settlement is in place.

According to Women’s Aid, between 2010 and 2014 there was a 17% reduction in the number of refuges run by dedicated domestic abuse service providers and, shamefully, a third of refuge referrals are turned away due to lack of capacity. The Government must ensure that capacity is built back up, not diminished, to ensure that no one who is abused is turned away from the support that they seek.

Dr Marsha Scott from Scottish Women’s Aid has said that the policy of capping housing benefit may create an environment where women are unable to escape a violent relationship. We must not be put in a position where a person is unable to flee a violent relationship because they cannot afford the accommodation costs in a refuge. It is unacceptable that we face the risk that people will be locked in violent relationships because they cannot afford to seek help.

The risk is especially high for people aged under 35, who under the proposals will be restricted to the shared accommodation rate. According to Scottish Women’s Aid:

“In 2014-15, the 26-30 years old age group had the highest incident rate of domestic abuse recorded by the Police in Scotland. Women in this age group clearly have a significant need for domestic abuse support services—including refuge accommodation.”

Even Lord Freud has admitted that this policy has had “unintended consequences” for the public purse. He gave a commitment to Scottish Women’s Aid that he would protect refuge accommodation from any unintended consequences resulting from welfare reform. I call on him to honour that promise and find a solution as soon as possible.

The UK Government have left tenants in uncertainty over their future housing situation. Using discretionary housing payments to top up the gap between LHA and the actual costs of supported accommodation is simply not secure enough. Angus Women’s Aid has stated that that will create additional barriers and risks for women and children who are experiencing domestic abuse and
seeking refuge. They will be subject to a postcode lottery because local authorities will decide whose support needs can be met—or not. DHPs should be used to ensure that people are protected, not to mitigate bad and ill-thought-out Tory policies.

To conclude, I strongly urge the Government to reconsider their approach and offer full protection for women and children by ensuring that supported accommodation, including refuges, is exempt from the housing benefit cap. Simply delaying the changes is not good enough; these devastating changes must be stopped, and stopped now.

4.7 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): This has been a thorough and important Opposition debate, with 21 contributions. I welcome the new Work and Pensions team and the conciliatory tone that the new Secretary of State took in his opening speech. I gently chide him, however, for saying that the Government have an exemplary record, because during the passage of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill last year, which the Minister for Employment will remember well, they refused an Opposition amendment that would have exempted supported housing from the 1% cut to housing benefit. Although I recognise that it is early days, I hope that we can move forward in a constructive way.

I pay tribute not only to my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame M. Morris) for his excellent speech, but to a number of other hon. Members who have spoken. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) rightly identified the issues with the local housing allowance cap and gave some practical examples of how it would affect her constituents. Similarly, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) spoke of the threat to refuges. Obviously, with the Scotland Act 2016 coming into force, the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Administration will have the opportunity to take their own course of action in relation to any future cap if the Government choose not to act.

I commend the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) not only for his remarks today but for his Adjournment debate last week. It is positive that we are able to work across the House on this very important issue. So many Members from across the House recognise the issues that very vulnerable people face.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) rightly identified the knock-on effects of the proposals on other Departments, especially in terms of costs. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) made a very powerful speech on the impact of cuts to supported housing provision for people with mental health issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) highlighted the impact on her constituents.

I take some exception to the remarks of the former Minister for Disabled People, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson). I am sure that he did not intend to misrepresent the figures in what he said about the funding provided to disabled people, but spending as a percentage of GDP has gone down. A total of £30 billion of support to 3.7 million disabled people has been cut—

Justin Tomlinson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Debbie Abrahams: No, I am sorry—there have been so many opportunities for that. I am sure you will go straight to Hansard, Madam Deputy Speaker, to see exactly what those remarks were.

I will move on to my substantive remarks. Many people have defined what supported housing provides, in terms of both accommodation schemes and support to very vulnerable people. It includes preventive services, services to older people in sheltered housing and extra care. It may consist of supported housing for people who have suffered domestic abuse, people with drug, alcohol or mental health issues, people who have learning disabilities or difficulties, people who are homeless, former offenders or young people leaving care. As we have heard very powerfully, it supports people who have been in the armed forces. Services may be temporary or longer term—for example, services for older people or people with learning disabilities.

Although types of supported housing services range widely, they all share the common purpose of providing a safe, secure home and support for vulnerable people to live independent, healthy and fulfilling lives—something we all want. As has already been mentioned, supported housing has the added benefit of preventing acute admissions to our already much-stretched health and care services, offsetting financial pressures in the Departments responsible for those services and many other Departments to the tune of £640 million a year. Rents for supported housing tend to be higher than those for general needs housing because of the nature of the services they provide, but it is estimated that investing in such accommodation delivers a net saving to taxpayers of around £940 per person, per year across all client groups.

Last year, the estimated number of supported housing units needed for the working age population was 125,196, but the number available was 109,556, a shortfall of 15,640. It is estimated that, if current trends continue, that shortfall will double by 2019-20. I am sure that the Minister has examples of homelessness from her own constituency casework. I have to say that my caseload on that has absolutely hit the roof in recent weeks and months. I am talking not just about sofa surfers but about people who are living rough, including one young man who was living in a tent by the side of a reservoir. There were no hostel places or other specialist accommodation available for those people. That highlights the importance of the shortfall in supply.

Over the past year, there has been considerable anxiety across supported housing providers that not only are there already too few places to cope with current levels of need, but that collectively, the Government’s 1% cut to housing benefit in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016—which also affects supported housing—and the cap on local housing allowance announced in the autumn statement will make thousands of supported housing schemes unviable, affecting hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people.

The National Housing Federation has estimated that the LHA cap alone will mean that 156,000 specialist homes will be forced to close, and that in addition to
stopping 2,400 new homes being completed, a further 9,270 homes planned for construction have been cancelled. In my area of Greater Manchester, it has been estimated that the loss of revenue to providers could be more than £50 million a year.

Although we welcome the Government’s suspension of the 1% cut to housing and the LHA cap, we are concerned—many Members have stressed this—about the delay in the review into providing a long-term, evidence-based sustainable solution, and the effect that that is having on investors regarding new developments, as well as on unfreezing those that have been put on hold because of the uncertainty. I am disappointed that the Secretary of State seems to have kicked that issue into the long grass—I am sure his mobile phone will provide the answers for him. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) said, we were expecting—as were housing providers—a statement by the recess, but we are now a day away from that. We are six months into the 12-month period, and 19 months since the start of the review period. When can we expect to see that review?

What contingency arrangements are in place to enable housing providers to plan? Will the Minister confirm that discretionary housing payments, with their inherent uncertainty and variable application, are not the Government’s only solution to plugging the gap in rent? Will she confirm that no one with support needs will go homeless or end up in unsuitable accommodation as a result of those delays, and that the housing and support costs of delivering a quality service will be met, and be flexible enough to meet challenging levels of demand? Will she ensure that evidence of the quality and value for money of supported and sheltered housing is published and promoted to the public? Finally, will she ensure that new funding arrangements for housing costs assure long-term funding certainty for providers, enabling them to continue investment in homes and services that meet the needs of vulnerable tenants, by funding rents and service charges through the social security system? Support costs should be funded through central Government on a cross-departmental basis, reflecting the outcomes that they would like to achieve.

The Prime Minister has given her pledge for a one-nation Britain, and she said that when she makes the “big calls” or “passes new laws” she will think of ordinary working-class families. As one of her first tasks, I ask her Government to start to right the wrongs that have been done to the most vulnerable in our society, and to ensure that they have the homes and support they need. We need deeds, not words.

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for her welcome, and many right hon. and hon. Members for the passion, enthusiasm and interest that they have shown in this debate. I am delighted to have been appointed to my role at the Department for Work and Pensions, which does vital work for millions of people across the country.

It is clear that Members across the House take a keen interest in the funding of supported housing, and rightly so given the valuable support that that sector provides to some of the most vulnerable citizens in society. Through the welfare reforms that my Department has been driving over the past six years, we have sought to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to realise their ambitions and potential, and we can see that working. Today’s labour market statistics show that employment continues to rise, and remains at a record high.

Alongside that ambition, however, we know the importance of protecting the most vulnerable in our society. We heard from 19 Back Benchers, constituency MPs representing the length and breadth of the country. Many of us have come across wonderful work of many supported housing providers in our own local communities. I apologise if I do not manage to mention everybody—I will do my best—but I would like to highlight some of the excellent contributions we have heard.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) mentioned the Blue Triangle project for young people in Glasgow city centre and the ARCH resettlement centre for homeless people. I emphasise to her that 200 individuals were involved in the review that has been undertaken. She spoke forcefully about refuge. Like me, she will have heard my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in today’s Prime Minister’s questions mention the importance of doing everything we can for those who are victims of domestic violence.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), who I thank for his very kind words and his immense amount of hard work in the Department, talked about Voyage Care. He is incredibly knowledgeable and I welcome the support he has given in this debate today. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) referred to Newhaven Foyer in her constituency and BHT Sussex for people with dependencies.

The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) referred to Nottingham City Homes, Nottingham Community Housing Association and Framework. She was very kind and invited me to visit her constituency. I note I did not get the same invitation to go to Plymouth in the summer months.

Oliver Colvile: Those of us in Plymouth would be delighted to see my hon. Friend there. I will be in touch with her regarding her diary.

Caroline Nokes: I thank my hon. Friend for that invitation. It did not take much of a nudge, did it?

My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) gave a number of examples from her constituency, including the Canaan Trust with which she spent a night sleeping rough. When I was newly elected, I remember spending a night sleeping on Southampton Common. I was very fortunate: the Society of St James gave me the easy option of sleeping rough in August.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) spoke movingly about the support provided for his constituents by the Black Country Housing Group. The hon. Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) spoke about the importance of Bramwell House, run by the Salvation Army, for homeless people in her constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) spoke about Solihull Carers, and the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) spoke about Rush House and recognised the importance of Departments...
across Government working together to find a solution that works for a very diverse sector. I assure him we are doing exactly that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) said that visiting supported housing providers was one of the most moving and important things he had done as part of his job. He referred to a number of very important providers in his constituency.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) talked about housing provided by Emmaus, Action for Blind People, housing for older people, women's refuges and many others. I think that that provides us with some perspective on the great amount of variety in this incredibly diverse sector.

The right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) spoke about the savings for the public purse that could be found through supported accommodation. He is, of course, right. By investing in supported housing as a preventive service, potential pressures on other public services, such as the NHS and the criminal justice system, can be eased. I want to reassure hon. Members that we do appreciate this very important point. We are mindful that we need to look at the costs and benefits of supported housing in the round.

Mention was made of Brexit, which I guess is inevitable. It is still too early to tell what the impact will be, but we are keeping markets under close review and are actively engaged with housebuilders. Ministers from the Department for Communities and Local Government are meeting industry leaders to listen to their views in light of the EU referendum result.

I would like to pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). I thank her for welcoming me to my position. She has an incredible track record. She is immensely knowledgeable, and I value her experience and expertise. As she mentioned, we have shared platforms together. I hope we will continue to do so. It was a great sadness for me that I had to resign as vice-chair of the all-party group she continues to do so. It was a great sadness for me that I had to resign as vice-chair of the all-party group she chairs. I hope I will continue to work alongside her. I want to make it really clear that my door is always open to her. She made the incredibly important point that we need consensus and commitment on this issue and I am determined to find that.

From experience, I know of the excellent work of organisations such as the Enham Trust in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) and Care after Combat. Enham provides a wide range of housing options for around 7,500 people across the country, with a particular focus on disabled people. Some of my constituents have benefited from its supported living venues, where residents receive the care and support they require in fully accessible homes.

Care after Combat has recently opened Simon Weston House in Southampton, which specialises in accommodation, rehabilitation and life skills for former armed forces personnel who find themselves in the prison system, and I look forward to visiting it shortly. I was pleased to hear the hon. Members for Easington (Grahame M. Morris), for North West Durham (Pat Glass) and for St Helens South and Whiston (Marie Rimmer) all mention the military covenant and the importance of what we do for former service personnel.

The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who unfortunately is no longer in his place, intervened with an important point about the YMCA, alongside which, in its capacity as a supported housing provider, I have been pleased to work. He also mentioned Northern Ireland, where, of course, these matters are devolved.

For hundreds of thousands of people across the country, from those with mental health conditions to ex-offenders and those escaping domestic violence, the importance of supported housing cannot be overestimated. We have heard the concerns of the supported housing sector about the application of the local housing allowance rates to all social sector rents. Before coming to this role, I met representatives from Women's Aid, both locally in Southampton and nationally, and I have arranged to meet stakeholders about this issue. I know there has been a strong dialogue with the sector already; that will continue.

I assure the House that I understand its concerns, and as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out at the start of the debate, we are committed to providing a solution. It is a hugely diverse sector and we need a funding solution that can fit the whole of it. We are committed to making an announcement early in the autumn that will set out the Government's views on what that solution should look like.

The shadow Secretary of State made a number of points, and it is critical that in response I reiterate that this is a complex sector but that we are determined to get it right. It is far more important that we get it right than that we rush something through. I reassure the House that this issue remains a key priority for the ministerial teams at the DWP and the Department for Communities and Local Government. Indeed, Ministers across Whitehall and in the devolved Administrations have an important stake in the outcome of our review.

I would like to place on the record my thanks to the organisations across the sector, local authorities, providers and indeed residents of supported housing who have engaged so willingly in our evidence and policy reviews. I want to ensure that we continue to work closely together as we move towards a consultation on the long-term options for reform in the autumn.

At the start of the debate, the hon. Member for Easington described Ministers as “old hands at making policy in an evidence-free zone”. I am not sure how badly to take the comment about “old hands” but let me assure him that this is absolutely not an evidence-free zone. I look forward to updating the House on our proposals and to continuing to listen to hon. Members’ views on how best to ensure that the supported housing sector that we all value so much can continue to thrive. We have heard from the Secretary of State that the review will be published in the early autumn. I therefore urge hon. Members to oppose the motion.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 256, Noes 290.

Division No. 51] [4.28 pm

AYES
Abbott, Ms Diane
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Mr David
Arkelss, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Bienkisnop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgen, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chambers, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Craddock, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elliott, Tom
Elmfield, Mrs Louise
Farrelly, Paul
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flinn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Furniss, Gill
Gardner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glinond, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Mrs Anna
Grundy, Andy
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendy, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kinar, Danny
Kinlock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Levis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, rh Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Mary
McDonald, Sinbhai
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, John
McGarry, Natalie
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Rayner, Angela
Reed, rh Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Sididdq, Tulip
Simpson, David
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Spellar, rh Mr John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symphonds, Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eliidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Corri
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeff Smith and Vicky Foxcroft

NOES

Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter

891 Supported Housing: Benefit
20 JULY 2016
Supported Housing: Benefit
892
to the following Act:

Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent

notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent

Question accordingly negatived.
Charter for Budget Responsibility

4.43 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House calls on the Government to withdraw the Charter for Budget Responsibility: Autumn 2015 update, which was laid before this House on 12 October 2015, and to lay before the House at the earliest opportunity an alternative update which provides the basis for stabilising the UK economy and providing long-term investment for growth.

I see that the Chancellor has not joined us today. I was hoping he was going to improve on the record of his predecessor for attendance, but it is good to see the Chief Secretary on every occasion.

What the leave vote said to many was that a new economic approach is needed. Too many of our country’s places and people feel they have been left behind, and this Government’s current fiscal rules are clearly exposed as inappropriate for an economy facing this kind of shock. So we need a new framework for fiscal policy that will support the investment this country desperately needs, yet all of us have been left without any clarity from the Government over their future direction. Business groups today report they are increasingly concerned about the Government’s current lack of direction and their lack of interaction with the Government. The lack of a clear plan is already harming investment.

The Prime Minister indicated in her initial speech that she was looking to set a new direction for Government economic policy. We agree that a change of course is needed, including more investment and an industrial strategy.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is hinting at what we hope will be a change of direction for the Government. For far too long, the Government have concentrated more on achieving a balanced budget than on managing the economy. They have not been creating demand. They should have been listening to the likes of Paul Krugman, Joseph Stiglitz and Richard Murphy, all of whom have been giving the Government a map to follow for years. The fact that they have failed to follow it explains why we are in this situation today.

John McDonnell: I will come on to the way in which the fiscal rule implementation has harmed the economy and prevented economic growth, resulting in the slowest recovery from recession in our history, but I shall now press on. I listened—

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John McDonnell: It would be helpful if I could just finish this sentence.

I listened to the Prime Minister’s answers at questions today, which unfortunately suggested that she will largely be sticking to the fiscal approach that has failed so badly. So the uncertainty continues, and until this Government make their plans clear, Britain will be on hold.

Jeremy Quin: On the speed of the recovery, we are coming out of the deepest recession that we have perhaps ever known, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would recognise the fact that we have recovered far faster than many of our major industrial competitors.

John McDonnell: This is the slowest recovery in our history. The last time a date was put on it was 1066. The way in which we are recovering is on the basis of increased household debt, low incomes and insecure jobs. I do not think that any Government should be proud of that record.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John McDonnell: Let me just finish another paragraph before I give way again.

A new set of rules for fiscal policy is needed. I know that some Members have questioned the need for fiscal rules at all. During the discussions on the Fiscal Responsibility Bill in early 2010, I recall the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), who was then shadow Chancellor, saying that the Bill was a “completely feeble stunt” and the “biggest load of nonsense that this Government have had the audacity to bring to Parliament in this Session”.—[Official Report, 5 January 2010; Vol. 503, c. 72.]

That was the then shadow Chancellor condemning Gordon Brown for having a fiscal rule. A short while later, when he became Chancellor of the Exchequer, he produced his own fiscal rule: the fiscal responsibility charter. He missed every target in his first charter, so he brought in a second one. He was on course to miss the targets in his second one, so he brought in a third.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): The shadow Chancellor has just questioned the performance of the economy under the fiscal rule, but is it not the case that the deficit fell from 11% to 4% of GDP, that the economy created 2.6 million jobs—more than in the rest of Europe put together—and that the employment rate increased by 4% and now stands at the highest level in our country’s history? Is not that evidence that the approach of the last Government worked and should be continued?

John McDonnell: I remind the hon. Gentleman that under his own Government’s fiscal rule, the deficit should have been completely eliminated last year, and debt should have dropped but it has increased. I will send him a reading list.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): When the Prime Minister was first elected last week, she said that she would govern for the many and not for the few. However, in response to questions today about the fact that poverty is affecting many people in this country, she gave the usual answer, which was that we have to have a strong economy. That suggests that she is departing from what she said in Downing Street a few days ago. Does my hon. Friend agree that this has been the longest recession resulting from punitive measures since the second world war? The second world war lasted for six years; this has lasted longer. It is brutal and it is punishing the needy in society.

John McDonnell: I was trying to take heart from the fact that when she spoke in Downing Street, the Prime Minister recognised just how divided Britain is between...
the wealthy and those at the sharpest end of the austerity measures. I was hoping that that would be translated into an acknowledgement today that the fiscal rule must go.

Several hon. Members rose—

John McDonnell: Can I just press on a bit further before I give way again? I am sure there will be plenty of time, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As I was saying, the former Chancellor missed every target in his first charter, so he brought in a second. He was on course to miss the targets in that second one, so he then brought in a third. In September last year, he presented his 2015 update. The current charter for budget responsibility sets targets for an overall balance on Government spending inside five years, with debt falling in each year of the Parliament. However, the Government knew last summer that the vast majority of economists who were asked had criticised the approach, as had the Treasury Committee. Almost without exception, the Labour party agreed with the macroeconomic profession that the approach was likely to prove misguided. We were defeated in the Lobbies that day, but our warnings have been proved prescient.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): The shadow Chancellor will know that any critique of the Government should be accompanied by a coherent alternative strategy. On that basis, is he embarrassed that the Leader of the Opposition's economic adviser Richard Murphy described the Labour party's approach as having “no policy direction, no messaging, no direction, no co-ordination, no nothing”?

John McDonnell: He is not the economic adviser and never has been, because we doubted his judgment, unfortunately. He is a tax accountant, not an adviser. He is actually excellent on tax evasion and tax avoidance, but he leaves a lot to be desired on macroeconomic policy.

Turning to the Government's performance, their charter for budget responsibility lacked credibility from the moment it passed into law and has now lost what shreds it retained this year. Since last September's debate, every target in the charter that could have been missed has been missed. By the time of the March Budget, the OBR announced that the Government were on track to miss their target for the welfare cap for every year of this Parliament. The charter also insisted that the debt to GDP ratio would fall in each year of this Parliament, but the OBR said in March: “We now expect the debt-to-GDP ratio to rise between 2014-15 and 2015-16”.

The Government managed to stay on target for its 2020 surplus only through some accountancy that might best be described as imaginative. The writing was already on the wall and then in June the then Chancellor used the backdrop of his fiscal charter as the pretext for threatening British people with a further austerity Budget should they vote to leave the EU.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): This is all very technical, but politics is about people. I was told today that unemployment in my constituency is higher than it was this time last year and remains more than double the UK average. Stockton Council, the Tees Valley local enterprise partnership and local companies are doing their bit, but our people are suffering more under the Government's austerity measures. Is it not time that the Government looked again at council and development budgets and based them on the real needs of our communities?

John McDonnell: Saying that the fiscal charter is a technical matter is a good point, but it is the foundation upon which these poor—to say the least—decisions are being made, and a lack of investment is the result.

Following the vote to leave the EU, despite the threat of a punishment Budget we have seen an entirely predictable U-turn. No punishment Budget is scheduled and we have been told by both the old and new Chancellors that one will not happen and that, on the contrary, we must be realistic and accept that the deficit will not be gone by 2020, as predicted by the charter. From the responses at Prime Minister's questions, it seems as though the surplus target for 2019-20 has now been dropped or has at least slipped to some unknown date in the future. Let us be clear: the Conservatives claimed that their approach would eliminate the deficit in five years, but it will not have happened after 10 years. Three targets set—every target missed. The 2015 charter appears to be dead in the water.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. Does he agree that it is appropriate to have a fiscal charter as a matter of principle? Strong economies, such as those of Germany, Austria and Switzerland, all have such a rule.

John McDonnell: Of course. That is why we support a fiscal charter approach and have produced a realistic one—fiscal charters must be realistic. If the Government set targets and then miss the three that they set themselves, that undermines the credibility of the Government's economic policy making.

The only hope of rescuing the existing charter is by activating its knockout clause, which the Chancellor referred to in an earlier speech. To remind hon. Members, if growth has been below 1%, is below 1% or is forecast by the OBR to be below 1% on a rolling four-quarter by four-quarter basis, the charter’s targets can be suspended. The problem is that the OBR recently announced that it will not release new projections until later this year, so we remain in the dark about whether the charter targets are still in operation. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, we can only assume that the charter still holds. That means Departments and other public agencies are operating under the old rules; they are still implementing planned spending cuts and still holding back investment decisions. It is essential for the wellbeing of this country that the House repeals the updated charter, because as it stands the charter still requires achieving a surplus, which we all know is impossible to achieve, as I believe the Prime Minister admitted today.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): One flaw in the current charter is that it is all about the supply side—reducing welfare costs, reducing debt and eliminating the deficit. What this economy needs at this
moment in time is investment. We need investment in infrastructure and in skills, and we need investment in the future.

**John McDonnell:** As always, my hon. Friend is spot on. We are on the same page as almost every organisation that has an interest in the economy in this country; the CBI; the Federation of Small Businesses; the British Chambers of Commerce; and the TUC. All of them are saying exactly as he has said.

**Mr Mak:** Controlling welfare spending has been a key element of this Government’s economic plan and has helped to make the fiscal charter a reality. How would the hon. Gentleman plug the black hole? Would he raise taxes, raid pensions or print more money?

**John McDonnell:** The problem with the hon. Gentleman’s contention is that we were told the way to control welfare spending was to introduce a welfare cap, and this was part of the charter. The Government have now breached that charter consistently and are forecast to breach it in every year throughout their Administration. The point I am making is that the fiscal charter is almost redundant now, because it is so ineffective. Housing benefit did rocket, but the way to control welfare is by building council homes again, so we are not pouring money into the pockets of private rented landlords.

**David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con)** rose—

**John McDonnell:** Let me just press on; I commit to coming back to the hon. Gentleman. Madam Deputy Speaker might get a bit hot if I continue to take too many interventions.

Households and businesses up and down the country need clarity and guidance, and it would be irresponsible to leave them without guidance as to the Government’s actions until the autumn. Waiting until October is a luxury this economy cannot afford, and Britain is on hold until the Chancellor makes his plans clear. Unfortunately, this is only the latest consequence of a shocking lack of planning by the Government for the eventuality of a leave vote. The then Chancellor said back in March that a credible blueprint was completely missing from the leave campaign, but a blueprint of any kind seemed to be missing from the entirety of the Government. The Chancellor must now take the necessary steps to give himself the freedom to invest in the economy, without being bound by a surplus rule he has conceded is likely to be ditched in the autumn in any case.

**David Rutley:** I very much hope that Madam Deputy Speaker is not too hot at this point in time. The hon. Gentleman is trying his best to put forward his arguments, but his approach completely lacks credibility—he has not even brought any Labour Members in to support him today. Is the truth not that even two Eds were better than none?

**John McDonnell:** I will have to watch my language, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let me say to the hon. Gentleman that when someone is going to crack a joke in this place—I know this because I have failed so often—it is best that they get the script right. As for Labour Members, the message has come across in every debate we have had, consistently since September, including today, that this is about the difference between having a fiscal charter that allows us to invest and one that does not. It is as simple as that. I respect his views and I have listened to his contributions in the past, but on this issue I believe that even those on his own side are beginning to move.

Britain is on hold until the Chancellor makes his plans, because, unfortunately, as I said, this is not the only consequence of the lack of planning. I say to Conservative Members that it is important now that we recognise the decisions that have to be made as soon as possible, particularly on the surplus rule. We already know about the black hole in March’s Budget brought about by the Government’s U-turn on personal independence payments, but following the leave vote, the former Chancellor also announced plans to reduce corporation tax to below 15%. That is a significant fiscal announcement. According to the ready reckoner of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, by the time it takes full effect it could mean an enormous additional £4 billion giveaway by the Treasury. This is money that could otherwise be spent on public services. It would be useful to know today whether the successor Chancellor is planning to be similarly generous to large corporations and whether the reduction to 15% is still part of the Government’s plans.

**Lucy Frazer:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way yet again. He has mentioned a couple of times that Britain is on hold, but just this week SoftBank bought ARM Holdings, a company in Cambridgeshire that spans my constituency, for £24 billion, which shows that Britain is still open for business. People still very much want to invest here, and there is nothing in the economy on hold.

**John McDonnell:** I will come on to that, but I have to say that there are some concerns about the sale of British assets, and I am simply echoing what the Prime Minister herself said only a few weeks ago.

**Alex Cunningham:** Energy-intensive industries are also concerned about the lack of planning in the country. They are extremely anxious about the future of emissions trading schemes inside and outside the EU, and many are desperate for British Government action to ensure that they can stay in business in the longer term. They want action on crippling carbon taxes now, and after we leave the EU. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must address these issues, and that it is time the Chancellor made a commitment to champion and help to finance carbon capture and storage?

**John McDonnell:** I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench were listening to that. The Chancellor has a long list of issues that he needs to address to give some certainty, certainly if we are to see long-term investment in such things. I share my hon. Friend’s views: there is too much uncertainty with regard to a whole range of taxation and support initiatives from the Government. To be frank, it is jeopardising jobs as well as the future of our planet.

**Mr MacNeil:** We have been hearing this refrain that Britain is not on hold and that things are happening, but they are not. Britain is very much on hold. It is
actually worse than that, as we see if we look at our neighbours. The hon. Gentleman might remember how, a number of years ago, this House mocked both Iceland and Ireland. It does not say much about them now when Ireland has trebled the growth of the United Kingdom and Iceland double the growth. On a recent visit to the Central Bank of Iceland, I was told that the economy had grown so fast that it needed to be slowed down, and that it needed migrants to fill its jobs. These are economies that were once mocked in the United Kingdom and that are now very much laughing quietly to themselves as they speed into the sunset.

John McDonnell: I think the argument is sound. Until we obtain a fiscal rule that reflects the reality of our economy and our future, we will not return to the dynamism that is needed to restore growth and to ensure that we have wages and jobs that are beneficial to the community overall rather than the low paid and insecure work that we have at the moment.

Let me press on, because I do not want to strain your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is not just Members on these Benches who believe that the fiscal rules adopted by the Government are not fit for purpose. The former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), called for a £100 billion infrastructure fund to invest in schools and housing. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government called for tax cuts across the board and spoke about a Growing Britain fund, funded by more borrowing. The new Prime Minister repeated today the need to abandon the surplus target—perhaps to let it slip. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs spoke about the need for “prosperity, not austerity”. We welcome all those conversions to our line of argument, but none of this can be achieved within the confines of the charter as it now stands until the Office for Budget Responsibility advises otherwise.

We saw the consequences of the policies based on the old fiscal framework yesterday in a report from the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies. Let me just remind Members what the report said: the incomes of young people are still 7% below where they were before the financial crisis, and the incomes of those in their 30s, 40s and 50s have remained stagnant. Andy Haldane, the chief economist at the Bank of England, has spoken about a “lost decade” for earnings. McKinsey reports that four fifths of households have seen either no improvement or falling earnings. That is what we have to show for the year of fiscal rules from the former Chancellor. There is a consensus now across the country, from the TUC to the CBI, that investment is needed. Earlier this year the IMF told the Government that it had no objections on the grounds of fiscal responsibility to the Government undertaking more investment. The OECD agrees, but until the OBR gives permission to suspend the surplus rule, the Chancellor is constrained by his own rules.

The Government’s current plans for public sector net investment for the rest of this Parliament are for it to fall in each year, from £36.4 billion this year to £32.1 billion in 2019-20. Of course, we do not expect a full Budget now, but the least we need is a commitment to recognise
voices calling for hundreds of billions of pounds of investment. We are winning that argument. The problem is now that we need decisive change from Government with regard to fiscal rule; otherwise Britain will remain on hold.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I am sure that one of the things that my hon. Friend learned, as I did, during the referendum was that, as I mentioned, the British people have had enough of austerity. They want politics to change. They want investment. Some of my hon. Friends have mentioned the areas of investment. It is important that we learn the lesson of the referendum—that people have had enough of austerity.

John McDonnell: Many voted to leave on the basis that they and their towns and regions felt left behind as a result of seven years of austerity, which have brought about high levels of poverty, lack of investment, and low-paid jobs and insecure jobs. As a result, I think there was an expression of anger in the referendum about a whole range of issues. People were saying to the Government, “We’re not satisfied with your performance, we’re not satisfied with the way we are being governed and we want change.”

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): There is something in what the hon. Gentleman says, and there are parts of the country that clearly felt angry and left out, but I found that, overwhelmingly, the reason why people were going to vote to leave was their concern about immigration. My understanding is that he supports limitless immigration—not putting controls on it—and that matters if he is going to bring the Brexit debate up in his speech.

John McDonnell: Let us be clear, because it is best not to exaggerate people’s positions. I think the response on immigration was a response to the concerns people had about the undercutting of wages, the pressure on public services and so on. That is why, on the development of the free movement of people, we have always argued—particularly from the Opposition side—that we should ensure there are sufficient controls, but also mechanisms to prevent the undermining of wages. That is why the last Labour Government—I praise them for this—set up a fund to alleviate the pressure on public services. I think a whole batch of grievances was wrapped up in the vote, and we have to learn from that.

One of the key grievances, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) said, was the impact of austerity on people’s daily lives, which is caused by the adherence to a fiscal rule that we now know is virtually bankrupt and having counter-productive implications for our economy by holding back the investment that many people—even on the Government side—now feel is needed.

Lucy Frazer: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John McDonnell: Would the hon. and learned Lady allow me to finish? I have taken several interventions, and she will be able to speak. [Interruption.] Oh, go on.

Lucy Frazer: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way—he is being very generous. He said there are a number of alternatives to the position the Conservative Government put forward. He also said in answer to an earlier intervention that he accepts there should be some sort of fiscal rule. Will he tell the House when Labour would return our budget to a surplus?

John McDonnell: Let me outline Labour’s fiscal credibility rule, which we set out a number of months ago. We said that we would have a forward-looking target to achieve a cyclically adjusted current balance by the end of a rolling five-year forecast period. Why? Because that gives us the flexibility to adjust to shocks such as the one we have seen. Capital expenditure would be excluded from the deficit target in order that the Government can invest for higher growth. The contentious issue was that in September was that the then Chancellor included capital investment in the overall fiscal rule, which held back investment, and that is why we have seen the figures for Government investment falling. Debt as a proportion of potential GDP would be lower at the end of each five-year Parliament than at the start. Again, that gives an element of discipline.

However, we also make the point that when conventional monetary policy is hampered by the lower bound to interest rates, the rules will be suspended in order that fiscal policy can then work, but we have suggested that the Monetary Policy Committee should be the determinant of that. Why is that more flexible than the existing rule? It is because, as we have seen, the Office for Budget Responsibility, for example, is not going to report until the autumn, but the Monetary Policy Committee meets monthly, so that will give us more flexibility. In our credibility rule, we also said that the OBR would be responsible to Parliament, with a clear mandate to blow the whistle on any Government breaching those rules, so that gives an element of independence. It is a fiscal rule, but a credible one. If it was operating now, we would be abiding by it, and we would be investing for the future.

Let me press on to the end. We hope the Chancellor will heed those who call for a much needed and eminently affordable change in direction. It is a tragedy for this country that the Conservative party has come to notice that alternative only as a result of the leave vote. As I said, I announced on Monday that we would support a large programme of investment to help to ensure that the potential of our economy is met. We proposed a national investment bank, which would help to boost investment across the country, ensuring that no community is left behind.

In conclusion, Labour will do all it can to ensure that the price of any negative shocks from the leave vote will not be paid by working people in any part of the country. In March, we saw the fastest unravelling of a Budget almost in living history. Now, the entire fiscal approach, as underpinned by the current charter, has collapsed in almost a year. The Government’s economic credibility faces nothing less than a catastrophe unless they rise to the challenge.

We cannot wait for the OBR to report in due course that there has been a negative shock and that the targets are suspended. To be frank, the mandate as it stands is shredded and must go. There is no credible option left to the Chancellor but to undo what should never have been done, to put right his predecessor’s mistakes, to repeal the charter and to support this motion, bringing
forward an alternative that provides the basis for the stabilisation of the UK economy and the provision, above all else, for long-term investment in growth.

5.15 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke):
This Government have been clear that we will not waver in our determination to take every opportunity to stabilise and strengthen the British economy. Ever since we were elected in 2010, we have been resolute in carrying out our plan to build a more resilient economy—one where we invest in our future growth; one where we return the public finances to a sustainable position; and, therefore, one where we are ready for whatever comes our way.

It has not always been an easy course to follow. The Government and the British people have worked hard to fix the public finances. We have had to make tough choices and difficult decisions.

We can be proud of what we have all achieved over the past six years. We have brought down the deficit by almost two thirds from its post-war peak in 2009-10. We have the highest employment on record and the lowest rate of unemployment in more than a decade. There are almost 1 million new businesses in our country since 2010 and, working with the Bank of England, we have strengthened the financial system. That is a long way to have come.

The second thing that we can all be proud of are the strengths that we still have in this country. We are still one of the best places in the world to do business, one of the best places in the world to invest, and one of the most innovative, forward facing and outward-facing countries in the world.

It is because of that hard-won recovery, and because of our hard-working families and businesses and the enduring strengths that we still have here in the UK, that we are all now in a position, and are as ready as we have ever been, to be a country that is prepared for the uncertainties of the future.

Jeremy Quin: On the question of the UK being a great place to do business, does my right hon. Friend agree that cutting corporation tax, which was referred to by the proposer of the motion, is a very positive sign and a way of attracting businesses to locate and invest in this country?

Mr Gauke: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Our record on corporation tax—we cut it from 28% in 2010, it is now 20%, and we have legislated to reduce it to 17%—has made the UK much more attractive. The likes of the OECD have made it clear that corporation tax is one of the most distorting and, therefore, least growth-friendly taxes. The fact that we have moved so dramatically in this era—during which we have also put the public finances on a sounder footing—to make our businesses much stronger puts us in a much stronger position than we would otherwise be. It is striking that, in survey after survey of international businesses, the position of the UK has improved in terms of our reputation as a place to do business. In particular, our tax reforms have helped attract investment here. I know from the meetings that I have had with international businesses when they are choosing where to locate activity that the fact that our corporation tax regime is more competitive is a factor that helps to drive investment to the UK.

Alongside that, we have taken significant steps to ensure that the international tax system is such that businesses pay the taxes that are due, but it is absolutely right that the UK positions itself as a more competitive place, and that is what we have done.

John McDonnell: For clarification—I raised this in my speech—is it still Government policy and in their plans to move towards 15%?

Mr Gauke: The Chancellor has made it clear that he will look at all the options when it comes to the autumn statement. It is the case that we have legislated to move to 17%, and it continues to be the case that we want to send out a signal that the UK is open for business and that we will still have a competitive tax system. My hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) has already raised that important point. The precise policies we will follow at the autumn statement are a matter for the Chancellor to announce then, but Government Members are united in our belief that the steps we have taken on corporation tax have made us much better prepared for the uncertainties of the future.

Alex Cunningham: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his position. I also welcome the Financial Secretary to her position, and I believe that the Exchequer’s gain is the Department of Health’s loss. The Chief Secretary talks about this country being the place to do business. He heard me talk about carbon capture and storage in an earlier intervention. Will the Government now commit to doing more to help energy-intensive industries—with energy costs, but also by dealing with some of the carbon taxes they face—and commit to greater support for carbon capture and storage?

Mr Gauke: I entirely agree, in relation to my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary, that the Treasury’s gain is the Department of Health’s loss. I will not pre-empt any autumn statement announcements on energy-intensive industries or any other area. I would point to the steps we have taken as a Government to help energy-intensive industries. We have responded to the points made to us by that sector with support for energy costs and so on. No doubt, the hon. Gentleman will continue to make his case on behalf of those industries.

James Cartlidge: I want to follow up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin). On cutting corporation tax, does the Chief Secretary not agree that the key point is that, although many people are calling for huge investment programmes by the Government, the investment we need must come from the private sector, and that if the private sector pays less tax, it will invest more?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. In particular, in the context of corporation tax—after all, it is a tax on profits and on the return on investment—if we lower the rate and increase the return on investment, we would expect, all other things being equal, to see an increase in investment by such companies. In recent years, we have seen increases in business investment and
in foreign direct investment. I would argue that we face some immediate challenges as a consequence of the Brexit vote, but I remain convinced—the evidence is very strong—that the steps we have taken on corporation tax will ensure that we are better prepared than we would otherwise have been.

In the context of the challenges we face, whatever one’s views—remain or leave—I think everyone predicted that a vote to leave would result in some short-term turbulence in our economy. As the Prime Minister has rightly said, Brexit means Brexit, but we have to get through this immediate period, in which some of the risks that exist will crystallise. Since the referendum, the value of our currency has dropped by a tenth compared with the dollar, and independent commentators expect to see a general slowing of investment, exports and business decisions. However, if we do all we can to stabilise our economy and set it back on a clear path, I believe we can prosper in the new circumstances.

Andrew Gwynne: Are we not missing a trick here? The Chief Secretary will know that bond yields are at an all-time low. Private sector growth is not as strong as it perhaps ought to be. There are really good projects that are ready to be invested in and there are companies that are desperate for investment. Is it not now time for the Government to redouble their efforts to refocus their economic policy on a proper programme of investment in growth?

Mr Gauke: I do not think the hon. Gentleman gives the Government the credit we are due for what we are doing on infrastructure. I understand the argument that we need to do more to improve our infrastructure, but let us remember what we have done: more than a quarter of a trillion pounds has been invested in infrastructure since 2010, the average annual investment in the last Parliament was 17% higher than in the preceding one and we have set out plans to invest more than £100 billion in infrastructure by the end of this Parliament.

We are taking measures on infrastructure, but we must put those in context. We also have to ensure that we have sound public finances. The immediate response to the shock of leaving the European Union has to be to stabilise our economy and set it back on a clear path, I believe we can prosper in the new circumstances.

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We can take measures to help improve infrastructure in this country, but all measures to help growth—whether our outward-looking approach to trade, our pro-business tax policies, or improving infrastructure or skills—can and must go hand in hand with the need to take our public finances seriously, and the Government will pursue that balanced approach.

What we hear from the Labour party continues to be unbalanced, and there is a failure to take into account the need for credibility with the public finances. Labour may have changed a lot of its personnel, but I fear that there is a degree of continuity in the failure to face up to challenges in the public finances, and the motion reflects that. I therefore urge the House to oppose the case for fiscal indiscipline that we have heard today, and to oppose the motion before us.

5.36 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I am glad that the Minister mentioned short-term turbulence as a result of the Brexit decision—the Chancellor has already spoken about that. The Minister is a pragmatic politician, so if that short-term turbulence turns into medium or long-term problems in two, five or 10 years—not least because of the absence of trade deals with the world’s biggest trading bloc—I hope that he will turn on the pragmatic tap even more strongly than he has perhaps tried to do in the Treasury so far.

This debate is about the fiscal charter, so I will run through a small bit of history and make some other comments. When the coalition Government first introduced the charter for budget responsibility, the fiscal mandate was for a cyclically adjusted current budget to be balanced by the fifth year of a forward-looking forecast period—that was similar to the plan laid out by the Labour shadow Chancellor earlier. As the Library has helpfully pointed out—it has helped a great deal with this debate—that plan was shortened to the third year of the forecast period in the December 2014 charter update. That also focused on the current balance, which is the difference between Government revenue and current, rather than capital, expenditure. Focusing on the current Budget was designed, at least on paper, to protect public sector capital investment, which is important.

A number of speakers have mentioned capital investment today, but the real problem is that capital expenditure forecasts, and real capital investment, have been rising and falling over the past few years like a yo-yo. There is concern that the National Infrastructure Commission was designed not so much to facilitate investment and drive it on, but rather to delay some of it further—but I digress.

The previous mandate used a measure of the budget balance adjusted for the economic cycle to allow the flexibility to run a deficit during recessions and a surplus during booms. The fiscal mandate was accompanied by a supplementary debt target. Originally that was for public sector net debt to fall as a share of GDP in 2015-16, but that was moved to 2016-17 in the December 2014 update. That target, of course, was not met—one of a number of broken promises by the Government in the previous Parliament, in which debt, deficit and borrowing targets all failed to be delivered as promised in 2010.

That brings us to the current charter for budget responsibility and the fiscal mandate. The charter sets out the OBR’s role, how it performs its duties, and the
required content of its publications. It lays out the Government’s fiscal mandate, supplementary debt target, and essentially the cap on welfare spending. The OBR assesses and reports on progress against those targets in the economic and fiscal outlook. Just in case anyone has forgotten, the current fiscal mandate target is for the public sector’s overall budget—public sector net borrowing—to be in surplus by 2019-20. Once a surplus has been reached, the target is for a surplus to be achieved every year. Frankly, that is impossible if we are to manage the economy in a sensible way. The other target is the supplementary debt target, where until 2019-20 the fiscal mandate will be supplemented with a target for public sector net debt to fall as a percentage of GDP in each year. Those targets, as the Chief Secretary said, will apply unless the OBR assesses there has been a significant negative shock. That is, in effect, where we are today.

If annual real growth in the economy is less than 1%, the OBR will judge there to have been a significant economic or negative shock and the economy will be out of what it calls “normal times”. If the OBR judges that a negative shock has occurred or will occur, fiscal targets will be suspended. That is the nub of the problem with these rules. If the OBR looks backwards over a 12-month period before confirming that growth was less than 1%, that might mean that changes to monetary or fiscal policy may not be delivered or enacted as quickly as they should have been to minimise the problems of a slowing economy. Likewise, if the future forecasts are overly optimistic—quite a common phenomenon in this place—necessary changes to fiscal or monetary policy required to protect jobs and growth might be delayed longer than they should be. In essence, the charter and the rules are a policy for inertia, rather than a policy for action.

Part of the charter requirements are that, should the rules be suspended, the Treasury must set out a plan to return the budget to surplus, including temporary fiscal targets. That plan must be approved by a vote in the House of Commons. One of the last acts of the previous Chancellor was to appear to suggest a suspension of the rules. I think he said—the Chief Secretary can correct me if I am paraphrasing this incorrectly—that the automatic stabilisers would be allowed to function and that corporation tax would be subject, potentially, to automatic stabilisers would be allowed to function and that corporation tax would be subject, potentially, to deep cuts. If that was the plan, it was not very detailed. I have not yet heard of any temporary targets and Parliament has not yet voted. We are about to go into recess and there is no vote on the horizon. I think that that tells us all that the charter is not fit for purpose and that the rules in place for when promised targets fail are not even remotely being adhered to. It would be better, I think, not simply to suspend the charter, but to rip it up and start again. I am rather less concerned with a plan and a charter to deliver an arbitrary surplus. More important is a plan to deliver real economic growth.

It is worth pointing out that over the past six decades or more, budget deficits have been the norm. Surpluses have been very rare. Since 1955-56, the UK’s public sector budget has been in surplus for only eight years. The last surplus was 15 years ago. The OBR suggested that the UK was set to return to surplus by the end of the decade, but that now looks unachievable—another broken promise. There is, however, a bigger problem than a surplus rule, which the OBR described, in civil service code, as “ambitious relative to the fiscal performance of past governments”. I will translate that, Mr Deputy Speaker: it means the Government will not meet their targets. The bigger problem is that it is designed to suck consumption out of the economy before recovery is secured. The scale of that, even as recently as the 2016 Red Book, is breathtaking not just cutting £10 billion a year more than is necessary to run a balanced economy, but by 2020-21 cutting spending by £50 billion a year more than is necessary to run a balanced current budget.

We know where the cost of this austerity falls: it falls on the poorest in society. How do we know that? The Government have told us. As the cuts and tax rises have risen, so has the ratio of cuts to tax rises, placing the burden of austerity and an arbitrary fiscal target squarely on the backs of the poorest.

This mandate is now collapsing around the Government’s feet, along with the much-vaunted and never-delivered long-term economic plan—a plan that is a bit like a unicorn: everybody knows what it looks like but no one has ever actually seen it. [Laughter.] I used that in a previous speech, but I did not get a laugh that time. It has been said that fiscal rules can be applied in other ways, but the previous Chancellor and, I presume, the current one believe that the current level of public sector debt is too high and that running a budget surplus is the only reliable way to reduce it.

The Treasury Bench has argued that high levels of debt are too risky and too damaging for the UK, leave the UK vulnerable to future economic shocks and squeeze out other public spending through high debt interest payments. At face value that is fine, but there are other credible and fiscally responsible ways in which the deficit can come down and debt can fall as a share of GDP.

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman is making a detailed and, in his own way, cogent argument, but—[Laughter.] It was meant to be a compliment. The key word, however, is “investment”, and my view is that investment needs to come primarily from the private sector. He talks about the benefits of getting debt down. Surely one of the key benefits is the confidence it builds in the economy among those big international companies that we want to invest in the UK.

Stewart Hosie: I agree that confidence will come from a reduction in debt as a share of GDP and a real reduction in the deficit, and I have no aversion whatsoever to genuine, substantial private sector investment. Unfortunately, in the current climate, because of the Brexit decision, there is a bit of a hiatus—substantial investment is being put on hold and might be lost. Trust me, in the competitive international world, every other country in Europe will be saying, “See that £10 billion you were putting into the UK—bring it here.” They will be saying that in Germany and France, and when we are independent, we will be saying it in Scotland too. This is when the UK Government should be stepping in to make sure that any gap in essential investment is filled.

On the alternatives, others have pointed out that the UK can run deficits and allow the ratio of debt to GDP to drift down over time, arguing that the value of debt can be squeezed through economic growth. We have not heard a lot about growth. For many years, the mantra from the Government was: growth alone will not solve the problem. I happen to agree, but there has been no
plan for growth at all. Instead, we have had almost a fetish and obsession with austerity and cutting debt, irrespective of the growth consequences.

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman says he has not heard enough about growth. I will give him some stats. The IMF says that UK growth will be greater than that of Germany and France. They might well try to lure expenditure in their direction, but our growth is still exceeding that of our European partners.

Stewart Hosie: Growth in the UK exceeds that in other countries sometimes. It is higher than G7 averages sometimes; other times it is not. The most up-to-date forecast is for a likely cut in growth to 0.8% next year. That would be lamentable and unforgivable if it is avoidable.

My biggest problem with the charter is that the poor pay the price for this obsession with cuts. The fiscal charter was not delivered in isolation; it was delivered with a welfare cap limiting how much could be spent by Government on certain social security benefits over the rolling five-year forecast period. Performance is then assessed by the OBR, which reports at each autumn statement on whether the relevant welfare spending has met or exceeded the level of the cap. It is highly likely, as we have seen and heard and as the Government have effectively conceded, that the OBR will tell us that the cap has been breached and will continue to be so for the rest of the Parliament.

We have, therefore, a fiscal mandate designed to suck consumption out of the economy; a fiscal mandate driving £50 billion a year more in cuts by the end of the Parliament than is necessary to run a balanced current budget; a mandate that, in essence, delivers inertia and might delay the necessary fiscal and monetary policy steps required to maintain growth; and a fiscal mandate that is ripped up if it fails, without a new plan—which would be necessary—put in its place. That fiscal mandate, in essence, is simply not worth having, so we will vote for the Labour party’s motion today. I would say to the Government, however, that they should suspend the charter or a mandate that has the confidence of politicians, the markets and the public.

5.50 pm

James Cartlidge: It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this timely debate. Although the Chamber is not as full as it could be, this is an incredibly fundamental debate on the key issue of the moment.

I start by congratulating the Front-Bench team on their promotions, including my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison) as the new Financial Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke) as Chief Secretary. I attended a school in Hertfordshire and represent a Suffolk constituency, while he represents a Hertfordshire constituency and was educated in Suffolk. The East Anglian Daily Times was particularly excited by his promotion as a son of Ipswich. I congratulate both of my colleagues again.

I am proud of this Government’s economic record. As the Prime Minister said when she opened a fantastic performance at Prime Minister’s questions today, we have record employment once again, we have an 11-year low in unemployment at 4.9%, and we know that the deficit has been cut by two thirds—an incredibly significant achievement that cannot be underestimated. I was reassured by the Prime Minister when she said that we still aim to live within our means. That was her key point when asked about austerity by the Leader of the Opposition. I was reassured, too, by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary when he said that the Government are still committed to fiscal discipline, which is so important.

As both the shadow Chancellor and the shadow SNP spokesman have said, we have been looking at this change in the fiscal target as regards a surplus. As they said, the interim fiscal mandate was for the public sector’s overall budget, more correctly known as the public sector net borrowing, to be in surplus by 2019-20 in normal times. That target was to apply unless the OBR assessed that there had been a significant negative shock. Understandably, therefore, there has been a lot of discussion about why this change, putting back the time for meeting this surplus, has come about. I found the Chief Secretary’s explanation reassuring—and the word “reassurance” is key.

My understanding is that when the British people made the decision on Brexit, it was in many ways a shock for the country. Just as the Bank of England Governor came on our television screens to reassure, talking about the steps he would be prepared to take to ensure confidence was maintained in the UK economy, so has the Chancellor of the Exchequer come forward as a reassuring presence, saying that he is prepared to take any necessary steps. I view this as part of an overall package. As the Chief Secretary said, it is of course monetary policy that has the primary responsibility when there are shocks to the economy. We have heard about the possibility even of a cut in the base rate from 0.5% to 0.25%. I see the decision about the surplus as part of the reassurance that the Government are prepared to take steps and react to circumstances.

Stewart Hosie: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that monetary policy is the first port of call when there is a shock. If it were deemed to be necessary, however, to invoke some kind of fiscal measure—whether it be a stimulus or anything else—does not the hon. Gentleman agree with SNP Members that the rules are so flawed that we have to wait until the autumn before the Government can even get a green light to make fiscal policy changes that might be necessary now?

James Cartlidge: I agree on the importance of monetary policy, and once again the hon. Gentleman makes a cogent point in his own way. Fiscal policy has been compared to a blunt instrument. It is not easy for the Government and the Treasury suddenly to make things happen in the way the hon. Gentleman describes. We need to wait on the figures. I understand that there are reports in the media today that the Bank of England’s agents have said it is business as normal out in the country despite Brexit, and I am very reassured by that. Let me be frank: I campaigned to remain. I was concerned about the economic impact of leaving, and I still am concerned. I always felt that the biggest potential impact would be on inward investment, but I think it will take time for us to see whether that is the case.
Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Is the hon. Gentleman not surprised, as I was, that the only body with a plan for Brexit was the Bank of England?

James Cartlidge: I will repeat the point. I think that monetary policy comes first in the present circumstances. I think that the Governor of the Bank of England is a very reassuring force in these times. He issued those warnings about Brexit because he was asked to state his opinion, and he stated it as honestly and transparently as he could. Once Brexit was the result—and it was a shock, as I think everyone concedes, even those who wanted Brexit passionately—he was a very reassuring presence for the Government.

As for fiscal policy, Opposition Members have mentioned measures such as huge amounts of investment. This may be only my personal view, but I would always emphasise that it is private sector investment that we should seek to drive, and a key part of that is the credibility of the Government’s overall stance.

Jeremy Quin: We hear calls for a fiscal stimulus, and I recall that there were similar calls during the financial crisis. People demand shovel-ready infrastructure projects, saying, “Let’s spend the money,” but such things always take time. The idea that a magic tap can be turned on and immediately flood the economy with a fiscal stimulus is illusory, and that is why people turn to monetary policy first. There are those who get excited and say that we need the ability to change now, but I think that that is a delusion.

James Cartlidge: I agree with my hon. Friend, but I would make one point about shovel-ready projects. We have quite an advanced business plan for a Sudbury bypass. If the Government decide to go down the Keynesian route of looking for shovel-ready schemes, we are ready in South Suffolk, and we are waiting for the bypass for which we have been campaigning for many decades.

There is an aspect of the charter for budget responsibility that has not yet been mentioned during today’s timely debate. The charter states:

“The Treasury’s objectives for fiscal policy are to: ensure sustainable public finances that support confidence in the economy, promote intergenerational fairness, and ensure the effectiveness of wider Government policy”.

The phrase “promote intergenerational fairness” strikes me as incredibly important. I hope that my Whip will show me some intergenerational fairness, and allow me a couple more minutes. I will not be long.

We have had a Conservative leadership election, and we are still having a Labour leadership election, but, as far as I am aware, no one has debated the following facts. Our national debt stands at £1.65 trillion; according to the Institute of Economic Affairs, our liabilities amount to £5 trillion; and it is estimated that, by 2062, all pensioner benefits will cost £491 billion. I was going to say a lot more about that, and there is a lot more that needs to be debated, but I am getting the hint.

John McDonnell: More!

James Cartlidge: I will end with this point, which I think will interest the shadow Chancellor. In March 1997, two months before what was a considerable low for our party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) came up with a policy called Basic Pension Plus, and I still believe passionately that that is the direction in which our country should go. The cost of the state pension—which, after all, is only £119 a week—is crippling, and the cost of pensioner benefits is enormous.

We need to debate those matters. I simply make this appeal: I hope that when I have a chance to speak again—when we all do—we shall be able to talk openly about the huge liabilities and costs that we face. As it is, the charter is there, we have been debating it, and, as I have said, monetary policy is at the forefront.

5.58 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Given the huge amount of interest in this debate—[Laughter]—I shall try to be as brief as possible.

Let me begin by welcoming the Chief Secretary to his new post. I have always found him very courteous, extremely helpful, and irrepressibly optimistic about Government policy.

During his very interesting opening speech, the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) made a number of references to fiscal rules, and that brought into my mind what I consider to be part of the problem with this whole debate. It is not so much about, “What are your rules?” It is a matter of, “Do you have an understanding of the nature of the economy that underpins any rules you may wish to set?” That is part of the problem.

I was also interested when the hon. Gentleman mentioned Andy Haldane of the Bank of England. I was at a speech Andy Haldane gave a few weeks ago, at which he pointed out that one of the things that had not been taken into account nearly enough was the nature of culture and behaviour in the financial area, and I would say in the economy as a whole.

I have a bee in my bonnet about the fact that much of the debate that happens in all parts of this House makes a fundamental assumption about the nature of economics today. It is broadly accepting of what many people would call neoclassical economics. That, to me, is a fundamental problem, and I will try briefly to explain why.

My critique of neoclassical economics is also based on what Andy Haldane talked about: an understanding of behaviour. Behaviour is fundamental to understanding economics. That has largely been lost in many of the analyses of the economy today.

As recently as 1 May this year, the distinguished Professor David Simpson wrote:

“Discontent with neoclassical economics has finally boiled over with the failure of Treasury civil servants and central bankers along with almost all academic economists to anticipate the largest recession since the 1930s, and the powerlessness of these policymakers in the face of the subsequent stagnation of output.”

There, for me, is the rub: current dominant thinking has taken economics down a mechanistic cul-de-sac, where it is no longer the purpose of economics to say, “How are you going to ultimately affect people in our society?” Instead it is about some surrogate technical measures that can be conveniently measured by the mathematicians among the Treasury, but fundamentally classical economics was about people and the effect behaviour had on people through markets.
Economics should involve qualitative at least as much as quantitative change measures. A market economy needs to be understood as an evolutionary—a change—process. Its changing nature inspires innovation and change and thereby creates complexity. That essential feature of innovation, according to the late Tom Burns—which he called the application of novelty—finds however absolutely no place whatsoever within the current dominant tradition. We cannot accommodate these types of behavioural variance that do not lend themselves to linear algebra. Therefore, factors that are not easily measured are left out by Treasury economic models.

Indeed, as Mervyn King pointed out in his recent book, “The End of Alchemy”, things like the political decision to go ahead with monetary union in Europe in 1999 had profound effects on output and growth in the western world, yet found no place whatsoever in the economic forecasting models used by central bank policymakers. I would add therefore that Government models of the economy are singularly ill-equipped to model the impact of Brexit. Hence, all the uncertainty we face today.

Sometimes it is intelligent to recognise when models are broken. It is little wonder therefore that Government forecasts have in recent years always been wrong, because they cannot take account of the type of behavioural change I have hinted at. Indeed, it would be utterly astonishing if by some fluke they were regularly accurate given the current model of the economy.

Let me give a couple of examples of why behaviour is important. I mentioned one in this House a few days ago in a debate about EU nationals. It involves a constituent of mine, Dougie Grant, who arranges mortgages for people. As a result of the Brexit vote, a deal he was about to close for two of my constituents was called off at the last minute because they were EU nationals who did not want to take the risk of investing here when their future was so uncertain. That could not be modelled by any linear algebra.

When I was on the Finance Bill Committee with the new Chief Secretary to the Treasury, I tabled a few amendments relating to subjects such as the effect of dividend tax on corporations. I am sure he remembers that debate well. When I asked whether the impact of certain measures on micro-businesses and small businesses had been modelled, I was told that HMRC does not model the size of businesses. Following a subsequent question that I sent to the Treasury about another aspect of the economy, I have received a written response in the past few days saying that the model of the Treasury’s economy does not take account of the size of businesses. Yet there is not a businessman in this House who does not recognise the profound difference in behaviour between someone leading an international corporation and someone running a small family business. We need to return to the human element, the behavioural element, of economics to enable us to understand more. That is to return to the human element, the behavioural element, and someone running a small family business. We need who does not recognise the profound difference in behaviour between businesses. Yet there is not a businessman in this House. Treasury’s economy does not take account of the size of businesses. Yet there is not a businessman in this House. Treasury’s economy does not take account of the size of businesses.

The right hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke), on his well-deserved promotion. I also welcome the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), to the Front Bench. I am looking forward to our first debate, and I hope there will be many more to come.

I thank all Members across the House for taking part in this important debate. My favourite quote was from the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) who said that the ex-Chancellor’s long-term economic plan was like a unicorn. We also heard from the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), who rightly highlighted the importance of intergenerational fairness, although I am not sure that this charter actually delivers that, by any stretch of the imagination. We also had a fantastic speech from the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin), who highlighted the problems associated with neoclassical economic thought in a very articulate way.

As the House will be aware, the Opposition did not support the charter for budget responsibility that we are debating today. And as we have heard throughout the debate, the Government were fully aware last summer that large swaths of respected economists did not find the then Chancellor’s charter for budget responsibility economically credible—if indeed the true intention was to generate growth and prosperity for all. My hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), the shadow Chancellor, said at the time: “The charter before us today…has little basis in economics.”—[Official Report, 14 October 2015; Vol. 600, c. 437.]

This has proved to be the case. If, however, the charter was simply the vehicle to implement an economic ideology that was dedicated to sucking wealth up to the top 1% and that systematically undermined and dismantled public services, it was a very clever plan indeed. I do not intend to spend time in this debate arguing about the moral conundrums of Conservative party economic doctrine, however. Today, I will try to be the moral compass of the new Chancellor and his team, as we are all acutely aware that the economic future of the country is standing at a critical crossroads.

As the shadow Chancellor has already outlined today, the Government have missed or been forced to abandon all three pillars of the charter. The welfare cap was missed in the last financial year and is due to be missed in each year until the end of this Parliament. The debt-to-GDP target has been spectacularly missed. Not only is the ratio of debt to GDP not falling; it has risen, with public sector net debt at 83.3% in the last financial year. Finally, the budget surplus, quite impossible to achieve without finding funds to fill the black hole that opened up in the March Budget, seems to have been more or less conveniently abandoned now on the pretext of the EU referendum result.

I suspect that many on the Government Benches realised some time ago that the target of a £10 billion surplus by 2020 was simply unachievable without drastic cuts to public spending, resulting in a short-term budget surplus. However, the price to pay simply to save embarrassment for missing this fiscal target was long-term economic stagnation and the loss of vital public services. The Financial Secretary to the Treasury may tell the House that the current charter provides a get-out clause whereby the rules are suspended if the OBR assesses that there is a negative shock to the economy. However, the OBR said that it will not publish figures until the autumn, so I urge the Chancellor and his team not to risk floating along directionless until then.
Our approach would allow substantial investment in infrastructure and skills to address the underlying issue of low productivity in our economy. Unfortunately, business investment has been falling for the past two quarters, even ahead of the referendum, and early indicators of pauses in investment and threatened job losses suggest that it could fall even further. British business needs the Government to step in and invest in industry to make Britain a better and more stable place to do business. Businesses do not want cuts to the headline rate of corporation tax. They do not want a raft of foreign takeovers as a result of the fall in the pound following Brexit. British businesses and their workforces should be the kings and queens of global industry. We desperately need a Government that are genuinely committed to what I call “industrial patriotism”, but we have sadly not seen that for some years.

Fortunately, the Chancellor and his team have an ideal opportunity to turn things around and develop their own direction for fiscal policy. The new Prime Minister said in her first speech to the nation: “When we take the big calls we will think not of the powerful, but you.”

We know that the new Chancellor supported further welfare cuts despite public outcry, so I must educate him as to how bad things really are. We have suffered nearly a decade of economic decline, increasing and stark regional inequality, and deep-rooted alienation and despair in communities that feel left behind, so it was no wonder that people voted in their droves during the referendum. They voted for an answer, for someone or something to blame for the dire economic situation that their communities were in.

Only a few weeks ago, the first Salford poverty truth commission was launched to examine the facets of poverty experienced throughout everyday life in Salford. At the launch, 15 members of the community stood up with real guts and courage in front of a packed hall to tell their individual stories. If the Chancellor and his team could hear what I heard that day, they would know that the economy in its current state is not working for the many.

I heard tales of people suffering horrific childhoods, turning to alcohol and drugs to numb the pain in the absence of counselling—there is no support for them, given the cuts in mental health provision. I heard from families on the breadline, unable to afford to heat their homes and forced to use food banks. I heard from those the Government would deem to have pulled themselves up by their bootstraps—people who are university educated and with well-paid jobs, but still struggling, crushed by a mountain of household debt. I heard from mothers forced to turn to prostitution just to keep a roof over their children’s heads. I heard about families hiding behind the sofa when the loan shark or bailiffs came calling, telling their children to be as quiet as mice. Mr Speaker, you may know that L. S. Lowry, the famous Salford artist, was a rent collector by day in the 1920s, knocking on doors just like today’s bailiffs. He tried to encapsulate the misery and struggle that he encountered in the pictures that he painted. What would he say if he knew that families were still going through the same agonising struggles in 2016?

We have called this debate today to give the Chancellor and his team of Ministers an opportunity to set out their stall, after 10 years of failed austerity economics. It is an opportunity to turn this country around and address regional imbalances; an opportunity to provide investment support for businesses in those areas hit hardest by economic decline; and an opportunity to invest in skills and infrastructure, and to allow businesses to form the capital to invest in themselves. We can make this nation’s economy the envy of the world and we can ensure that the prosperity we generate when we do that is enjoyed by the many not the few, but the direction of fiscal policy over the next few months is critical to that. It is one of the biggest calls this Chancellor is ever going to have to make. I really hope that his team has listened today and that the Prime Minister’s gesture towards “prioritising the many”, as Labour Members do, is not merely rhetoric.

6.15 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison):

I thank those Members who have been kind enough to welcome me to my new position on the Front Bench, including the Opposition spokesman. I was going to spend some time thanking those Opposition Members who contributed to today’s debate, but there is an obvious problem with that—none of them did! It is unusual to open an Opposition day debate and then not muster any Opposition Back-Bench speeches. I hope that the National party will be renewing its bid to become the official Opposition before too long. Nevertheless, we have had a good and thoughtful debate, and a number of serious points have been made. I therefore thank the Opposition for giving us the chance to debate this important topic, for allowing the House to reflect on the changes in the economic situation that the UK now faces, and for allowing Members to make contributions on how we move forward to rise to those challenges.

I must say at the outset that I do not recognise the picture of our country and of our economy that was painted in the speech we just heard. The phrase “dire economic situation” is simply not borne out by the facts, particularly on a day when we had excellent employment statistics. Turning to the situation in hand, the Government have made it clear that we will not hesitate to work with the Bank of England, wherever required, to stabilise our economy in the immediate term after the referendum decision, and we of course continue to monitor the position extremely closely. We will take any action that we can to prevent risks from crystallising, as we have made clear on numerous occasions, and we will look at all avenues to strengthen our economy. Although I hear this disputed from across the House, we must be clear that the UK economy starts from a fundamentally strong position; we totally reject some of the alternative views of history that were presented in this debate. Again, today’s employment figures are just one example of this, with unemployment falling to 4.9%, its lowest for more than a decade. That does not emanate from a dire economic situation, as was just suggested to us.

Any revision of our responsible fiscal framework would be set out following a thorough assessment of the economic data. We have heard the urging from those opposite to respond immediately, but it is important to examine what the economic data are actually saying, and that is what we are doing very carefully. That is why we have no plans to withdraw the autumn 2015 update of the charter for budget responsibility. As the Chancellor and Prime Minister have made clear, we will update the House with further details in the usual way, through an autumn statement later this year.
**Stewart Hosie:** I welcome the Minister to her place and thank her for what she just said, which was that the Government are prepared to take whatever steps are necessary to stop potential risks crystallising. That is an important thing for her to say on the record. Notwithstanding the fact that she is saying there will be a delay until the autumn and they will look at the numbers properly, may we have an assurance that if those numbers are as bad as they might be, she will not rule out any fiscal measures to stimulate the economy if that is what is required?

**Jane Ellison:** As we have said—the Chief Secretary was clear about this, and I think the point was conceded by the hon. Gentleman—we have already heard from the Governor on monetary policy, and that is really important. Conservative Members have spent the past six years making the strength of the British economy the nation's No. 1 priority. We will look at what is happening, and it remains our priority to make sure that we continue to chart a course that recognises some of the risks that exist in the current situation, makes sure we can manage them, and looks at the opportunities that are there to be seized. We have heard so little of that in this debate. We have heard a lot of talk from both the Scottish National party and Her Majesty's Opposition about austerity. As the Prime Minister said at Prime Minister's questions, the other way of talking about that is to say that it is living within our means. By being prepared to address that really difficult issue of a country living within its means, the Government and the coalition have secured hard-won credibility from which we can now move forward. That credibility is not held in every part of the House. It is not an accident that we are now able to move forward from a position of strength, or that people are prepared to invest in this country; it is because of the difficult decisions that have been taken over many years, the vast majority of which were opposed by those on the Opposition Benches.

Let me take this opportunity to make it very clear that any revisions to our plans will not alter the Government's clear commitment to this country that we would restore balance to our economy. As the Chancellor has said, we will no longer pursue the target to reach a surplus in 2019-20. Our plans to do so were based on the assumption of a different-looking economic climate. As is regarded internationally as good practice and as we see in fiscal frameworks right across the globe, our fiscal plans had a flexibility built into them, so that we could make revisions in the case of significant alterations to our economic situation. Here in the UK, that means that, if the independent OBR were to forecast four consecutive quarters of less than 1% growth a year, that target would be suspended. Admittedly that risk is perhaps more prevalent now than it once was, but it remains the conviction of this Government that any responsible plan for the long-term good of this country must be centred on a determination to tackle the deficit and reduce our debt.

In the good speech of my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), he made a point about intergenerational unfairness. There is no greater intergenerational unfairness than bequeathing massive amounts of debt and deficit to those generations yet to come. That remains at the heart of our plans to ensure that the British economy is healthy and able to respond to unexpected shocks.

**Dr Philippa Whitford:** We often talk about bequeathing the public debt to future generations, but is not what is actually happening private debt—huge mortgages, study loans, and so on?

**Jane Ellison:** The hon. Lady makes her point. Fundamentally, if we look at the debt the nation is carrying forward, the point remains that it is totally unrealistic of the Opposition to imagine that we can borrow massive amounts of money after they have spent the past six years voting down any spending cuts that were proposed by the Government. They just do not have the credibility to make that point.

We have seen, as a result of the referendum, how important it is that we have an approach that ensures that we are ready for any surprises that come our way. The Prime Minister told the House earlier that we have not abandoned the ambition to move to a surplus. As we have made clear, we will be setting out further details in the autumn statement.

Making savings, living within our means, and spending money efficiently are just one side of the task ahead. We cannot afford to take our foot off the pedal when it comes to creating the right conditions for growth, and there are many ways in which we can do that. In all fairness, speeches in this debate addressed that. For a start, we know that if we want to help our economy grow, we need to invest wisely in the right infrastructure.

There has been much discussion about infrastructure spending, but some of that discussion has suggested that it is rather a binary choice between living within our means on the one hand and investing in infrastructure on the other, but, as the Chief Secretary said at the beginning of the debate, that is simply not true. We are putting more than £100 billion into infrastructure over the course of this Parliament alone, and that will go to funding some essential improvements and new developments right across our country. We will keep working to make sure that this country keeps improving the skills in our workforce so that our businesses have what they need to stay on top.

It is important that we remain resolutely outward-facing. Now is not the time to pull up the drawbridge. Now is more than ever the time to open the door and to hear the message of young people that they want us to be an outward-facing nation. We want to seek all those international opportunities. We heard not a single word in the debate about today's employment figures, which reveal that youth unemployment is at its lowest since 2005. That is surely something that we should celebrate, for the sake of our young people.

It is vital that the UK remains one of the best places in the world to do business. We are sending out that message loud and clear. That involves making sure that our tax system remains fiercely competitive. It also means that we have to continue to take difficult decisions elsewhere to balance the books, because we have made major cuts in corporation tax to create that extremely competitive environment to attract business. Only this week we saw a great example of inward investment in our country.

Without doubt there are a range of challenges ahead, but there are also a range of ways in which we can continue to bolster our economy as we open a new chapter for the UK outside the EU. We are determined to do everything we need to do as a Government to
restore confidence, stabilise the economy and navigate our way through the times ahead. As we start our negotiations to leave the EU, we will tackle those new challenges head-on and we will take on board any new risks that start to emerge.

It is vital that we send out a message of confidence, and not just from the Government. It is important that we as a nation and we as a House send out a message of confidence, and some of the speeches today, I am afraid, bore no relation to the reality of life beyond this Chamber. It is important that we send out a unified signal that Britain is open for business, that we remain outward-facing and open to inward investment, and that we have confidence in ourselves as a country and in all the things that we can achieve in the years ahead.

The hard-won reputation that we have as a good place to do business cannot and will not be squandered as we look for those new opportunities. For all those reasons and many more, the Government reject the motion and urge the House to do the same.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 213, Noes 283.

Division No. 52] [6.27 pm

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Tellers for the Ayes: Vicky Foxcroft and Jeff Smith

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<td>Amsess, Sir David</td>
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Question accordingly negatived.
Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield Combined Authority (Election of Mayor) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 27 June, be approved. —(Christopher Pincher.)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Welsh Assembly Oath or Affirmation

6.40 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I have a petition from Gruffydd Meredith. The petition states:

The petition of Gruffydd Meredith,
Declares that there should be an option for new Welsh Assembly members to swear an oath or make an affirmation to the people of Wales instead of to a monarchy and/or crown; further that there should still be an option for new Welsh Assembly members to swear an oath or to make an affirmation to a monarchy if they so wished; further that this would provide a fairer choice for new elected representative which would be a better reflection of the broad scope of view in society; further that there is no requirement for members of the Northern Ireland Assembly to take any oath or affirmation but instead requires that members take a Pledge of Office; further that this proposed similar choice for Wales is important for Welsh political plurality and fairness; and further that an online petition on a similar matter has been signed by over 1,000 individuals.

The petitioner therefore requests that the House of Commons makes the necessary amendments to any present or draft legislation which governs the taking of oaths and the making of the affirmation to ensure that new Welsh Assembly members have the option to swear an oath or make an affirmation to the people of Wales rather than to a monarchy and/or crown.

And the petitioner remains, etc.

Mr Speaker: I call Mark Menzies to present a petition.

Not here. Where is the fella?

Restoration of the Wellington Monument in Taunton Deane

6.42 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I rise to present a petition relating to the Wellington monument, with 1,586 signatures. It declares that this iconic landmark, which is in a desperate state of repair, should be restored to its former glory and reopened to members of the public. The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to provide funding to restore the Wellington Monument to a safe and stable condition so it may be re-opened to members of the public.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Taunton Deane,
Declares that the current condition of the iconic Wellington Monument, established to commemorate the Battle of Waterloo, is in a desperate state of repair and is consequently unsafe; further that the 200th anniversary of its building will be celebrated in 2017; further that the closing off of this national cultural landmark is restricting community engagement and the recreational enjoyment of local residents; and further that its current condition is an unfitting memorial to one of our greatest war heroes, The Duke of Wellington.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to provide funding to restore the Wellington Monument to a safe and stable condition so it may be re-opened to members of the public.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

Closure of Lancashire’s Libraries and Museums

6.43 pm

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I rise to present a petition relating to library and museum closures in Lancashire. It declares that local libraries in the borough of Hyndburn should not be closed.

The Government’s cut of £262 million to Lancashire County Council’s funding so far has led to the proposed closure of some 40 libraries and several important museums. In addition to the several hundred signatures on this written petition, 6,000 people from across Lancashire have signed a petition on the e-petition website. Both petitions call on the Government to prevent an irreversible and damaging attack on Lancashire’s heritage, which will never recover. It is paramount that the Government work with Lancashire County Council to ensure that these institutions are not closed after the 12-week consultation period is completed.

The petition reads:

The petition of residents of Hyndburn,
Declares that local libraries in the borough of Hyndburn should not be closed.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take action to prevent the closure of libraries in the borough of Hyndburn.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
Beach Huts

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

6.45 pm

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): May I begin by welcoming my good and honourable Friend, the Minister for Housing and Planning, to the Front Bench? I think this is his first outing as a Minister and I am delighted that he is taking the opportunity to respond to a debate about a part of the country with which he is familiar. He recognises Dorset as being a really good place to go for family holidays and outings.

I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for enabling the House, on the eve of traditional family beach holidays in the United Kingdom, to give its attention to the important issue of beach huts. Beach huts have formed an integral part of traditional British seaside holidays for many years. They evolved from the single-sex segregated bathing machines that were erected in many seaside resorts in the 19th century and are now used, in the words of a recent planning application by North Somerset Council, to “allow families to relax in comfort, to store belongings and to access facilities such as water and power as well as”— and I think this is most important— “providing shelter from inclement weather”.

I cite an application that was made for the grant of planning permission for 132 beach huts at Weston-super-Mare in the spring of last year. The huts were to be erected on hard standing on a former bandstand and also on the promenade. In making the application to itself, the council was open in its public consultation. Furthermore, when the beach huts were first erected and found to be unpopular because they were too large—they blocked the promenade and interfered with the seaside views of others—the council went back to seek fresh planning permission. I cite that example from North Somerset Council as a precedent of best practice, because it entailed full consultation and transparency.

The purpose of this debate is to try to ensure that the approach of North Somerset Council becomes a legal requirement for all councils in England. Many councils recognise that if they are going to give permission for beach huts, they should go through the normal planning procedures, which involve an application, a consultation and so on. However, Christchurch Borough Council has avoided doing that over many months, to the extreme consternation of the public.

The legal background to the planning regime for beach huts is uncertain. The House of Commons Library, in its typically helpful way, has said:

“There is no simple answer as to whether beach huts require planning permission or can be classed as permitted development. Much will depend on the individual circumstances of the beach huts in question, for example, whether they are intended to be temporary or permanent, how easily they can be removed, their size and their physical attachment to the ground”.

We need clarity in our planning law. I hope that, by the end of tonight’s debate, my hon. Friend the Minister will have given some assurance that he will fill that lacuna and ensure that there is clarity, where currently the legal background is uncertain.

One of our country’s greatest national assets is its coastline. Large parts have been protected through the National Trust’s acquiring ownership of the land and securing it against intrusive development; if it had not been for the trust, a lot of our coastline might have been marred, just as a lot of the coastline in the Mediterranean and other parts of the world has been. Other parts of our coastline are in private ownership, so development is controlled by local councils. The gap in the public protection of our coastal amenities is where the land itself is owned by local councils, which seek to give themselves deemed consent for development without the need for any planning application or public consultation.

The extent of that gap in our planning regime has been exposed by what has happened in recent months in Christchurch. Christchurch Borough Council is commendably keen to maximise utilisation of its assets. Some of those assets include land held on long leasehold on Mudeford sandbank, where some of the most expensive beach huts in the country—if not in the world—are located. The Daily Echo recently reported a waiting list of 100 people for the sale of a beach hut with 138 square feet of accommodation, at a price of £250,000. That hut has no bathroom or washing facilities; those are available in a communal shower and lavatory block further up the beach.

It seems that commercial considerations were to the fore when Christchurch councillors came into contact with the television production company Plum Pictures, which was seeking an arrangement whereby there could be a competition for the design and construction of 12 new beach huts as part of the Channel 4 television series “George Clarke’s Amazing Spaces”—I have to admit that I have never seen that programme, but it is apparently a really good view.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a really fascinating case. I worked for a television company, HTV, which also made a series about beach huts, in that case the wonderful beach huts at Dunster, which are equally expensive. I make the case that beach huts have a certain attraction. We need to consider that—some are almost landmarks, such as the ones at Lyme Regis.

Mr Chope: There are indeed many attractive beach huts located around the country, and there are some amazing spaces. But when we talk about amazing spaces we ought also to think about amazing natural spaces. If my hon. Friend has ever had the privilege of visiting Highcliffe cliff top, she will probably agree that that is an amazing space because it is unspoilt. We can look out to sea and out to the Needles. Why should we wish to despoil such a place, to the detriment of local people, without at least some proper consultation?

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the hon. Gentleman is trying to tell the House that his constituency is naturally upmarket and requires no artificial input.

Mr Chope: That is a very good way of putting it, Mr Speaker. We enjoy a large cohort of visitors, not least now because of the popularity of the series “Mr Selfridge”, as Mr Selfridge is buried in a church in Highcliffe and spent much time at Highcliffe castle. We have quite a history and there are many aspects of life in Highcliffe and Christchurch that are attractive to visitors and to our resident population.
On 18 November last year the Christchurch Council community services committee agreed to allow a competition to proceed for the design and construction of beach huts at Highcliffe. That was confirmed by the Council’s resources committee on 2 December. Both meetings, and the decisions taken at them, were kept private on grounds of commercial confidentiality, despite the fact that the beach huts were to be sited on open, unspoiled coastline, which is also part of a site of special scientific interest.

Two months before, local residents had celebrated the Government’s rejection of a proposal for a massive offshore windfarm at Navitus bay of up to 200 wind turbines, each up to 200 metres in height—my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the local council, and many other colleagues campaigned strongly and successfully against that proposal. One can therefore understand people’s dismay when they found that the council, which had campaigned so effectively on their behalf on that issue, had secretly been cooking up a proposal with Plum Pictures.

That proposal emerged only in March this year, when people found out that the competition had been launched and were able to look at the brochure, which described Christchurch Borough Council’s “beach retreat technical specification”, for people to design their own beach retreat— they are called beach retreats because they are not just ordinary huts; they are larger than huts and for overnight, residential use around the clock, 24/7. Those beach retreats were to be located in a scattered formation across the clifftop at Highcliffe.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): As usual, my hon. Friend makes a powerful case. There are no beaches in Wellingborough, but this issue is much more important from a national perspective because when councils own land, they have a tendency almost to rubber-stamp the planning permission. If I have got it right, this case is even worse, because planning permission was not even applied for in the first place.

Mr Chope: Exactly. There has been no accountability for this at all, but I agree there is a problem when councils give themselves planning permission, because the Government are often reluctant to call in those applications, even when they involve development on the green belt. In a recent case in my constituency, development was proposed on the green belt for a new school, and the Government—much to my dismay and that of many of my constituents—did not call it in for a public inquiry, but that is another story.

The terms of this competition were

“to find inventive people to design and build innovative and exciting beach retreats.”

The 12 winners were to get £8,000 each to spend on the materials

“to make their dream beach hideaway a reality.”

The trouble was that they are not really hideaways at all; they are in the most exposed position one could imagine on the coastline. It was stated:

“All beach huts will be owned by the Council, but all designers will be guaranteed four weeks a year to enjoy the retreat they created.”

The brochure also spelt out that the winners of the competition would not need to apply for planning permission for their beach huts, and it boasted that

“Highcliffe is one of the South Coast’s most beautiful coastal points, located just round the corner from the famous beach huts of Mudeford Spit and with panoramic views that include the iconic Isle of Wight Needles.”

The competition was designed to close on 1 May, with winning participants notified on 13 May. The huts would be constructed and completed by 11 September, when filming would be carried out by Plum Pictures. The revelation that the council had entered into such a secret agreement for the development generated an immediate furor that continues to this day. A massive online petition with 1,400 signatures was presented to the council. There has been voluminous correspondence and other protests, and a new local action group has been formed to try to protect the coastline and the beaches against this sort of intrusion.

I asked the council how it was possible for such a proposal to go forward without the need for planning permission.

7 pm

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

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

Mr Chope: I was referred to the rules about permitted development, in particular the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015, which sets out the rules for what can be classed as permitted development; that is, development that does not require planning permission. Class A under part 12 of schedule 2 to the order grants permitted development rights for local authorities in relation to what are described as “small ancillary” buildings, including the setting of a size limit. It seems extraordinary to any layman that a small ancillary building could be interpreted as covering 12 separate overnight beach huts in isolated locations many hundreds of yards from any building, let alone a local authority-owned building.

The problem seems to be that in the order, “ancillary” has been deemed by the courts—at least in one judgment—to relate to a function of the council, rather than a building. This was discussed in the case of The Queen on the application of John Richards v. West Somerset Council in the High Court of Justice, Queen’s bench division, the administrative court on 23 September 2008. In this case, Judge Hickinbottom agreed that “ancillary” related to function. It seems, however, that that was on the basis that the parties to that particular case were themselves agreed that “ancillary” related to function, as is made clear in paragraph 21 of the judgment. The judge merely said that he, too, agreed that that must be the case:

“The building works or equipment constructed must be allied to a proper function of the council.”

I do not think that, on any normal interpretation of that case or the order, it could be said that “ancillary” relates to a function rather than to another building. I would be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister could ensure that the wording of the order is adjusted to make it clear that this is not the correct interpretation of “ancillary”. That is the only way, in our sovereign Parliament, we can overrule a wrongful interpretation of our intentions by the courts. I am sure the Government would not have intended that this sort of thing could
happen, with the council entitled to interpret “ancillary” in this way and not having to apply for planning permission as a result.

I would also be grateful if my hon. Friend established that the permitted development rules do not allow councils, in any circumstances, to avoid planning legislation, by deeming such huts of any size or shape to be permitted development. That is important to restore public confidence. It is also important because many of the powers available to Natural England to protect sites of special scientific interest are triggered only when a planning application is in play. I had a meeting with Natural England in my constituency to discuss this issue. It made it clear that, although it had a very limited role if the council applied for what is called an “assent” rather than a “consent”, it would have a much more significant role if the council had to apply for “consent” as part of a planning application. That is another good reason for strengthening the law in this area.

In the Highcliffe case, Natural England was involved, but, it seems, only as an afterthought by the council. I tabled a question to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which was answered on 6 June. It was prompted by reports emanating from the council that Natural England was content with what was being proposed.

Mr Bone: I have been listening carefully to my hon. Friend’s argument—it is a very strong argument—but can he put this in context? I thought he said that the competition ended on 31 May. How could a council have proposed to build luxurious and very expensive beach huts at a time when everyone in government was saying that the world was coming to an end because we were leaving the EU?

Mr Chope: The councillors viewed the designs for the huts in private, so I cannot comment on rumours that one of the successful designs had a large European flag with a cross through it on one side of the hut and a Union Jack on the other. My hon. Friend, as always, makes an interesting observation, although the competition ended on 1 May.

On 1 June, I was told by the chief executive of the council:

“The Council has been working closely with Natural England since the proposal for the huts first came forward”.

He went on to say that officers from Natural England had given detailed advice as to what would and would not be acceptable on the site and that the competition had been designed with that in mind. He was clearly saying that Natural England was content with the situation. From my discussions with Natural England, however, it is clear that it is not. Indeed, it did not receive an application from the council until 6 June, and following consultation, that application has now been withdrawn as unacceptable to Natural England.

I had hoped to tell the House that all had ended happily and that the application to Natural England had been withdrawn; that the proposal for residential beach huts had been withdrawn; that the rumoured alternative proposal for day huts had also been withdrawn; and that the council had agreed to go back to the drawing board and undertake proper consultation before even considering building any construction on or near the Highcliffe cliff top.

Unfortunately, however, the clarity that I hoped would emerge from the council’s scrutiny committee last night was not forthcoming. There are still rumours circulating that the council might want to develop beach huts and that it might be liable for damages for breach of contract because the competition has been abandoned. Most of all, however, the continuing lack of transparency and accountability is adding to public anger and frustration. The council needs to declare openly that it will not proceed with any beach hut development at Highcliffe unless or until there has been full public consultation, including on the design, location and terms of use of any huts.

Although this is all clouded in secrecy and is regarded as commercially confidential, I find it inconceivable that any council could have entered into a legal agreement for the construction of 12 beach huts without making it conditional upon the obtaining of the relevant consent from Natural England. As that consent has not been forthcoming, the contract, if properly drafted, could be easily terminated by the council on the grounds that one of the conditions had not been fulfilled. The fact that the council does not seem to have announced this to the world makes me suspect that it did not execute that basic precaution. If that is so, I fear a potential bill of many tens of thousands of pounds for my constituents. I am sure they will not be at all pleased at that prospect and will want to ask the sorts of questions I have been asking this evening but which have not yet been answered.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I am interested in what the hon. Gentleman is saying and I am wondering whether he might not refer the matter for consideration by the district auditor, given such a use of public money and the fact that the relevant legal considerations were not taken into account.

Mr Chope: The hon. Gentleman raises a very interesting point. At the moment, we would say that it was a bit premature to do that, but I am sure that the people of Christchurch will not allow this issue to rest until there is a proper holding to account of the people responsible.

In conclusion, as the pressure on local councils to operate more commercially increases, it is all the more essential that our natural heritage be properly protected. I therefore hope that the Minister will take immediate action to clear up the uncertain legal background to the planning regime for beach huts, so that other communities in England do not have to suffer the same ordeal as the people of Highcliffe in recent months.

7.10 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) on securing this debate and on raising the concerns of his constituents with his typical diligence. I thank him for his kind words about my appointment as the Minister for Housing and Planning. Two or three days into the job, I have already seen very clearly what we ask of our planning system. At the national and strategic level, it is the means by which we try to ensure that we build the houses we so desperately need and provide opportunities in our economy, while at the local
level, as this debate demonstrates, it is about ensuring that development in the places we know and love is sensitive and respectful to those areas.

Let me start by setting out how the Government are supporting coastal communities before I come on to the specific issues about the planning system. The great British coast has enormous economic potential, with coastal tourism contributing £4 billion to our economy every year. The Government are committed to the growth and success of coastal communities. Over the past four years, we have put more than £120 million into our much-loved seaside towns through the coastal communities fund. This money has helped launch more than 200 projects and will help to safeguard or create 18,000 jobs. That includes £2 million to create Europe’s first National Coastal Tourism Academy in Bournemouth, not far from Christchurch, to help accelerate growth in the visitor economy, focusing on improving the visitor experience, supporting coastal tourism businesses and bridging gaps in coastal tourism research and development. It is forecast to create 165 jobs in the local area and over 2,000 jobs nationwide.

To help deliver these vital projects, we have funded 118 coastal communities teams in England to take control of their own areas’ regeneration. This includes the Dorset coastal community team, which covers the area from Weymouth to my hon. Friend’s constituency. Friends of Christchurch. These teams have brought together local people, councils and businesses to submit joint economic plans for how to drive forward future growth, jobs and prosperity.

The community in Christchurch has worked collaboratively with neighbouring communities as part of the Dorset team, which has resulted in a comprehensive action plan for economic regeneration of this important coastline and a bid to the current round of the coastal communities fund. Earlier this year, the Dorset team consulted on its economic plan, including on specific area plans for Christchurch. I am pleased to see the team taking a proactive approach to improving the economy of the area and looking for innovative new projects. It is one of those projects—a proposal to build additional beach huts along the coastline—that has given rise to today’s debate.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for sharing his concerns about the planning regime for council-owned beach huts and the impact of this particular proposal on his constituency. I am sure that we are all sad to hear that the competition run by Christchurch local council, in conjunction with the “George Clarke’s Amazing Spaces” TV show, which offered a great opportunity to promote the area and involve the community in the development of this important coastline, has given rise to significant controversy.

With regard to the specific site used for the beach hut development, I am sure my hon. Friend will recognise that I am unable to comment on any specific case due to the Secretary of State’s role in the planning system. My hon. Friend is right that I know the beach in question, having family in nearby Hordle in the New Forest. I can set out the Government’s overall approach to planning and how it supports the development and success of coastal communities. I will also set out the position in relation to permitted development rights.

The planning system supports the Government’s commitments to securing sustainable economic growth. The national planning policy framework is a key part of the Government’s reforms to make the planning system less complex and more accessible. It vastly simplified the number of policy pages about planning. The planning guidance to support this framework is published online, and is regularly updated. The framework serves as guidance for local planning authorities and decision makers, explaining both how they should draw up plans and how they should make decisions about planning applications.

Our planning reforms and locally led planning system have given councils more discretion, especially when they are preparing local plans that identify where development should and should not take place. National planning policy requires them, through their local plans, to set out clear visions and strategies for their areas that positively and proactively encourage sustainable growth, and their plans should be tailored to the needs of each area in terms of strategy and policy. The plans should focus on the key issues that need to be addressed, and should be aspirational but realistic.

Councils should have a clear understanding of business needs in their markets, and should work closely with their communities in order to understand their needs. We want business, councils and communities to establish a shared vision for the growth of their areas. Coastal areas such as the Dorset coast, which have coastal community teams, have the perfect structure that enables them to deliver that vision through their economic plan. I am sure my hon. Friend agrees that growth in business is good for local communities, creating the jobs and prosperity that they need and providing the opportunity for social and environmental objectives to be met.

Let me now deal with the meat of my hon. Friend’s speech. Permitted development rights support growth by simplifying the planning system. Councils have permitted development rights for ancillary development that is required for the purposes of carrying out their functions. Whether a particular development requires planning permission or benefits from a permitted development right is a matter for the local planning authority, and, ultimately, for the courts. My hon. Friend cited some precedents in the form of councils that had applied for planning permission when developing beach huts, and he asked me to look at the wording of the general permitted development order. The Department is not aware of other cases in which concern has been expressed about such behaviour on the part of councils, but I will reflect on his request.

I can reassure my hon. Friend that, regardless of how planning permission is granted, safeguards remain to protect our most important landscapes. Permission granted by the general permitted development order is still subject to the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010. If a development granted permission by the order is likely to have a significant effect on a European site, the development cannot be begun until the local planning authority has determined, in consultation with Natural England, that it will not adversely affect the site. That is still the case when the local authority itself is the developer.

My hon. Friend referred to contact between his local authority and Natural England. I note that, according to Christchurch Council’s website:

“Staff from Natural England...have been involved in discussions with the Council about the proposals since the very earliest approach.”
The date of that approach is not given.

“The Council wished to ensure that NE had no objections to what was being proposed otherwise they would not have entered into discussions with Plum Productions.”

That is the company that is making the television programme.

“NE have given us advice throughout, in terms of what would and would not be acceptable to them, and where any huts could and could not be located to avoid damage to the SSSI. Until the final designs and sites have been selected it is not possible to submit a formal application to Natural England. Natural England must give their approval for the construction and location of the huts before any work can start on site.”

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend has quoted from the council’s website, but surely, if what he quoted was correct, it would not have been necessary for the council’s application to Natural England to be withdrawn, because Natural England found the proposition unacceptable.

Gavin Barwell: As my hon. Friend says, I was quoting from the information on the council’s website, but he has made his point very powerfully, both in his speech and in that intervention.

Ultimately, it is open to any third parties who are aggrieved by a council’s planning decision to apply for judicial review if they believe that the decision was wrong in law, but that must be done within six weeks of the decision’s coming to light. They can also ask the local government ombudsman to investigate if they consider that injustice has been caused to them as a result of maladministration. I recognise the concerns of my hon. Friend and his constituents and I commend him on securing this debate. I would encourage him and his constituents to continue to engage with the local council on this matter.

The growth of our coastal communities is a Government-wide commitment and my predecessors have worked with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and many other Departments to deliver a number of initiatives.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend says he would encourage people to work with the council, but will he also take this opportunity to encourage the council to consult and work with the local people on proposals to bring forward any future residential or other beach huts?

Gavin Barwell: I am certainly happy to do that. We have in this country a planning system which is to a significant extent locally led; it is for local councils to develop their local plans, but the Government would certainly encourage them to engage with their local communities, businesses, Members of Parliament and other interested parties as they do that.

It is of course important that all parties recognise that development, crucial though that is, is not at the cost of our valued landscape, and I look forward to ensuring that our planning system and this Government’s planning policies deliver for all in the community and continue to drive the success of coastal communities.

Question put and agreed to.

7.21 pm

House adjourned.
Deferred Divisions

ATOMIC ENERGY AND RADIOACTIVE SUBSTANCES

That the draft Nuclear Industries Security (Amendment) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 26 May, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 312, Noes 56.

Division No. 48]

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Bereshf, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brooke, Mr James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, Neil
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleervey, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn

Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Mr Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Kirby, Simon
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McDonald, Steward Malcolm
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria

Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Osborne, rh Mr George
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Phillip, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Robyson
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Souby, rh Anna
Speelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Deferred Divisions

20 JULY 2016

Deferred Divisions

Climate Change

That the draft Climate Change Act 2008 (Credit Limit) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 30 June, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 310, Noes 206.

Division No. 49]

Ayes

Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyly-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Dudbridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Elliot, Tom
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Elphicke, Charlie
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Gale, Sir Roger
Garner, rh Sir Edward
Garner, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griﬃths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Hafon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
| Herbert, rh Nick | Mowat, David |
| Hinds, Damian | Mundell, rh David |
| Hoare, Simon | Murray, Mrs Sheryll |
| Hollingbery, George | Morrison, Dr Andrew |
| Hollinrake, Kevin | Neill, Robert |
| Hollobone, Mr Philip | Newton, Sarah |
| Holloway, Mr Adam | Nokes, Caroline |
| Hopkins, Kris | Norman, Jesse |
| Howarth, Sir Gerald | Nuttall, Mr David |
| Howlett, Ben | Offord, Dr Matthew |
| Huddleston, Nigel | Opperman, Guy |
| Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy | Osborne, rh Mr George |
| Jackson, Mr Stewart | Paisley, Ian |
| James, Margot | Parish, Neil |
| Javid, rh Saaj | Patel, rh Prtit |
| Jayawardena, Mr Ranil | Paterson, rh Mr Owen |
| Jenkins, Mr Bernard | Pawsey, Mark |
| Jenkyns, Andrea | Penning, rh Mike |
| Jenrick, Robert | Penrose, John |
| Johnson, rh Boris | Percy, Andrew |
| Johnson, Gareth | Perry, Claire |
| Johnson, Joseph | Phillips, Stephen |
| Jones, Andrew | Philip, Chris |
| Jones, rh Mr David | Pickles, rh Sir Eric |
| Jones, Mr Marcus | Pincher, Christopher |
| Kawczynski, Daniel | Poulter, Dr Daniel |
| Kennedy, Seema | Pow, Rebecca |
| Kinahan, Danny | Prisk, Mr Mark |
| Kirby, Simon | Pritchard, Mark |
| Knight, Julian | Pursglove, Tom |
| Kwarteng, Kwasi | Quinn, Jeremy |
| Lancaster, Mark | Quince, Will |
| Latham, Pauline | Raab, Mr Dominic |
| Leadsom, rh Andrea | Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob |
| Lee, Dr Phillip | Robertson, Mr Laurence |
| Lefroy, Jeremy | Robinson, Gavin |
| Leigh, Sir Edward | Robinson, Mary |
| Letwin, rh Mr Oliver | Rosindell, Andrew |
| Lewis, Brandon | Rudd, rh Amber |
| Lewis, rh Dr Julian | Rutley, David |
| Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian | Sandbach, Antoinette |
| Lidington, rh Mr David | Scully, Paul |
| Lopresti, Jack | Selous, Andrew |
| Loughton, Tim | Shannon, jim |
| Lumley, Karen | Shapps, rh Grant |
| Mackinlay, Craig | Sharma, Alok |
| Mackintosh, David | Shelbrooke, Alec |
| Main, Mrs Anne | Simpson, David |
| Mak, Mr Alan | Simpson, rh Mr Keith |
| Malthouse, Kit | Skidmore, Chris |
| Mann, Scott | Smith, Chloe |
| Mathias, Dr Tania | Smith, Henry |
| May, rh Mrs Theresa | Smith, Julian |
| Maynard, Paul | Smith, Royston |
| McCartney, Jason | Soames, rh Sir Nicholas |
| McCartney, Karl | Solloway, Amanda |
| Mcloughlin, rh Mr Patrick | Sobry, rh Anna |
| McPartland, Stephen | Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline |
| Menzies, Mark | Spencer, Mark |
| Mercer, Johnny | Stephenson, Andrew |
| Metcalfe, Stephen | Stevenson, John |
| Miller, rh Mrs Maria | Stewart, Bob |
| Milling, Amanda | Stewart, Iain |
| Mills, Nigel | Stewart, Rory |
| Milton, rh Anne | Streeter, Mr Gary |
| Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew | Stripe, Mel |
| Mordaunt, Penny | Stuart, Graham |
| Morgan, rh Nicky | Sturdy, Julian |
| Morris, Anne Marie | Sunak, Rishi |
| Morris, David | Swain, rh Sir Desmond |
| Morris, James | Symes, Mr Robert |
| Morton, Wendy | Thomas, Derek |
| Mowat, David | Throup, Maggie |
| Mundell, rh David | Tipson, Edward |
| Murray, Mrs Sheryll | Tolhurst, Kelly |
| Morrison, Dr Andrew | Tomlinson, Justin |
| Neill, Robert | Tomlinson, Michael |
| Newton, Sarah | Tracey, Craig |
| Nokes, Caroline | Tredinnick, David |
| Norman, Jesse | Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie |
| Nuttall, Mr David | Truss, rh Elizabeth |
| Offord, Dr Matthew | Tugendhat, Tom |
| Opperman, Guy | Turner, Mr Andrew |
| Osborne, rh Mr George | Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew |
| Paisley, Ian | Vaizey, rh Mr Edward |
| Parish, Neil | Var, Mr Shalesh |
| Patel, rh Prtit | Vickers, Martin |
| Paterson, rh Mr Owen | Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa |
| Pawsey, Mark | Walker, Mr Charles |
| Penning, rh Mike | Walker, Mr Robin |
| Penrose, John | Wallace, Mr Ben |
| Percy, Andrew | |
| Perry, Claire | |
| Phillips, Stephen | |
| Philip, Chris | |
| Pickles, rh Sir Eric | |
| Pincher, Christopher | |
| Poulter, Dr Daniel | |
| Pow, Rebecca | |
| Prisk, Mr Mark | |
| Pritchard, Mark | |
| Pursglove, Tom | |
| Quinn, Jeremy | |
| Quince, Will | |
| Raab, Mr Dominic | |
| Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob | |
| Robertson, Mr Laurence | |
| Robinson, Gavin | |
| Robinson, Mary | |
| Rosindell, Andrew | |
| Rudd, rh Amber | |
| Rutley, David | |
| Sandbach, Antoinette | |
| Scully, Paul | |
| Selous, Andrew | |
| Shannon, jim | |
| Shapps, rh Grant | |
| Sharma, Alok | |
| Shelbrooke, Alec | |
| Simpson, David | |
| Simpson, rh Mr Keith | |
| Skidmore, Chris | |
| Smith, Chloe | |
| Smith, Henry | |
| Smith, Julian | |
| Smith, Royston | |
| Soames, rh Sir Nicholas | |
| Solloway, Amanda | |
| Sobry, rh Anna | |
| Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline | |
| Spencer, Mark | |
| Stephenson, Andrew | |
| Stevenson, John | |
| Stewart, Bob | |
| Stewart, Iain | |
| Stewart, Rory | |
| Streeter, Mr Gary | |
| Stripe, Mel | |
| Stuart, Graham | |
| Sturdy, Julian | |
| Sunak, Rishi | |
| Swain, rh Sir Desmond | |
| Symes, Mr Robert | |
| Thomas, Derek | |
| Abbott, Ms Diane | |
| Abrahams, Debbie | |
| Ahmed-Shiekh, Ms Tasmina | |
| Allen, Mr Graham | |
| Anderson, Mr David | |
| Arkless, Richard | |
| Ashworth, Jonathan | |
| Austin, Ian | |
| Bailey, Mr Adrian | |
| Bardell, Hannah | |
| Benn, rh Hilary | |
| Berger, Luciana | |
| Black, Mhairi | |
| Blackford, Ian | |
| Blenkinsop, Tom | |
| Blomfield, Paul | |
| Boswell, Philip | |
| Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben | |
| Brake, rh Tom | |
| Brennan, Kevin | |
| Brown, Alan | |
| Brown, rh Mr Nicholas | |
| Bryant, Chris | |
| Buck, Ms Karen | |
| Burden, Richard | |
| Burgon, Richard | |
| Cadbury, Ruth | |
| Cameron, Dr Lisa | |
| Campbell, rh Mr Alan | |
| Campbell, Mr Ronnie | |
| Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair | |
| Champion, Sarah | |
| Chapman, Douglas | |
| Chapman, Jenny | |
| Coaker, Vernon | |
| Cooper, Julie | |
| Cooper, Rosie | |
| Cooper, rh Yvette | |
| Corbyn, rh Jeremy | |
| Cowan, Ronnie | |
| Creagh, Mary | |
| Creasy, Stella | |
| Craddes, Jon | |
| Cunningham, Alex | |
| Cunningham, Mr Jim | |
| Dakin, Nic | |
| David, Wayne | |
| Davies, Geraint | |
| Day, Martyn | |
| Warburton, David | |
| Warman, Matt | |
| Wharton, James | |
| Whately, Helen | |
| Wheeler, Heather | |
| White, Chris | |
| Whittaker, Craig | |
| Whittingdale, rh Mr John | |
| Wiggan, Bill | |
| Williams, Craig | |
| Williamson, rh Gavin | |
| Wilson, Mr Rob | |
| Wilson, Sammy | |
| Wollaston, Dr Sarah | |
| Wood, Mike | |
| Wragg, William | |
| Wright, rh Jeremy | |
| Zahawi, Nadhim | |

### NOES

| Docherty-Hughes, Martin |
| Donaldson, Stuart Blair |
| Doughty, Stephen |
| Dowd, Jim |
| Dowd, Peter |
| Eagle, Ms Angela |
| Eagle, Maria |
| Edwards, Jonathan |
| Ellicott, Julie |
| Ellman, Mrs Louise |
| Farrelly, Paul |
| Farron, Tim |
| Fellows, Marion |
| Ferrier, Margaret |
| Fitzpatrick, Jim |
| Fiello, Robert |
| Fletcher, Colleen |
| Flint, rh Caroline |
| Flynn, Paul |
| Fovargue, Yvonne |
| Foxcroft, Vicky |
| Furniss, Gill |
| Gapes, Mike |
| Gardiner, Barry |
| Gethins, Stephen |
| Gibson, Patricia |
| Gilindon, Mary |
| Goodman, Helen |
| Grady, Patrick |
| Grant, Peter |
| Gray, Neil |
| Green, Kate |
| Greenwood, Lilian |
| Greenwood, Margaret |
| Griffith, Nia |
| Gwynne, Andrew |
| Hamilton, Fabian |
| Hanson, rh Mr David |
| Harman, rh Ms Harriet |
| Harris, Carolyn |
| Hayes, Helen |
| Hayman, Sue |
| Healey, rh John |
| Hendry, Drew |
| Hillier, Meg |
| Hodgson, Mrs Sharon |
| Hopkins, Kelvin |
| Howarth, rh Mr George |
| Hussain, Imam |
| Jarvis, Dan |
Deferred Divisions

Jones, Gerald
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinnoch, Stephen
Lamb, rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McGarry, Natalie
McGinn, Conor
Mcllnees, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
Meale, Sir Alan
Mears, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Paterson, Steven
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Spellar, rh Mr John
Stephens, Chris
Streeting, Wes
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Corri
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.
House of Commons

Thursday 21 July 2016

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

QUEEN’S SPEECH (ANSWER TO ADDRESS)
The Vice-Chamberlain of the Household reported to the House, That Her Majesty, having been attended with its Address of 26th May, was pleased to receive the same very graciously and give the following Answer:

I have received with great satisfaction the dutiful and loyal expression of your thanks for the speech with which I opened the present Session of Parliament

ELECTORAL COMMISSION (ANSWER TO ADDRESS)
The Vice-Chamberlain of the Household reported to the House, That the Address of 14th June, praying that Her Majesty will reappoint Alasdair Morgan as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1st October 2016 for the period ending on 30th September 2020, was presented to Her Majesty, who was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY (ANSWER TO ADDRESS)
The Vice-Chamberlain of the Household reported to the House, That the Address of 13th July, praying that Her Majesty will reappoint Jenny Willott to the office of ordinary member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority with effect from 7th August 2016 for the period ending 31st December 2020, was presented to Her Majesty, who was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

Oral Answers to Questions

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union

1. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What discussions his Department has had with the devolved Administrations on the timescale for invoking article 50 of the treaty on European Union.

4. Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What discussions his Department has had with the devolved Administrations on the timescale for invoking article 50 of the Treaty on European Union.

13. Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): What discussions his Department has had with the devolved Administrations on the timescale for invoking article 50 of the treaty on European Union.

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The hon. Gentleman will know that the Prime Minister has visited Scotland and Wales already and has made it clear that she wants to achieve the best possible deal for the whole of the United Kingdom on leaving the European Union. She has also made it clear that article 50 of the treaty on European Union will not be triggered before the end of the year.

Martyn Day: The Prime Minister has stated that Brexit means Brexit, and the First Minister of Scotland has stated that, for us, remain means remain. Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that the Scottish people have spoken and that therefore their sovereignty should be respected?

The Attorney General: The people of the United Kingdom have spoken and their sovereignty must be respected. The people of the United Kingdom have made their decision on whether to leave the European Union, and we will respect it.

Alison Thewliss: The Prime Minister has indicated that she will not trigger article 50 in the UK until there is a UK approach to Brexit. Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that a legislative consent motion is required before the Government have the legal authority to trigger article 50?

The Attorney General: It is perfectly right, as the Prime Minister has made clear, that all parts of the United Kingdom, including the Governments of the devolved Administrations, should be able to participate in the process of developing the United Kingdom’s approach to these negotiations. That does not mean that any of the parts of the United Kingdom has a veto over this process: so, consultation most certainly, but veto I am afraid not.

Peter Grant: At a time when Brexit is already causing more than enough confusion, the Prime Minister is saying that article 50 will definitely not be triggered before the end of the year, but the Brexit Minister has said that it definitely will be. Will the Attorney General clarify for us who is correct in articulating present Government policy?

The Attorney General: No, I do not think there is any confusion. We must ensure that there is clarity about the United Kingdom’s position going into the negotiations, and that we have done that work before we begin them. As the hon. Gentleman knows, it is for the United Kingdom Government to determine the point at which article 50 is triggered. We should do so when we are ready.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Attorney General tell my constituents in Kettering what invoking article 50 means? What is article 50? Where is it kept? Is it in a secret drawer in the Prime Minister’s office to
which only the Attorney General has the key? Is it a letter that the Prime Minister signs, or is it the Queen who signs it? How will article 50 be invoked?

The Attorney General: I can assist my hon. Friend and his constituents to this extent. Article 50 is article 50 of the treaty on European Union and therefore copies of it are kept in all sorts of places. I am not sure whether there is one in my desk, but what it says is: “A Member State which decides to withdraw shall notify the European Council of its intention.” As I have said, it will be for the UK Government to do that at a time of their choosing.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I am quite happy with the Government consulting the devolved Administrations, but what concerns me is that we do not finish up being held to ransom by the Scottish nationalists. Whatever the Government try to do, they will never be able to satisfy the Scottish nationalists. Can the Attorney General please reassure me and my constituents, who voted overwhelmingly to leave the European Union, that their wishes will not be frustrated by the Scottish National party?

The Attorney General: The Prime Minister has been very clear that the United Kingdom will leave the European Union, and that means all of the United Kingdom, but, as I said earlier, it is very important that in the process of exiting the European Union all parts of the United Kingdom have an opportunity to contribute to the negotiations in which we will engage. That is the spirit in which the UK Government will approach this process.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We have to be mindful that the EU referendum was UK-wide, so all parts of the United Kingdom were involved. I hope the Prime Minister will come to Northern Ireland; perhaps the Minister can confirm that. It is important to keep the grants and assistance that Northern Ireland receives.

The Attorney General: Indeed. I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point. I am sure the Prime Minister will wish to visit Northern Ireland very shortly, and she and I have clearly in mind the particular difficulties that will apply to the process in Northern Ireland because of the land border with the Republic of Ireland. The hon. Gentleman will have been present yesterday when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland dealt with this question. The hon. Gentleman knows that it is at the forefront of our minds and we will wish to make sure that we reach a satisfactory settlement.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): The new Brexit Minister has said that the UK may be able to stop EU migrants coming to the UK before we leave the European Union, while remaining in the single market. What is the legal basis for this pick-and-mix approach to European law? Does he think that this hubristic attitude will get the UK the best deal in the negotiations?

The Attorney General: The legal position is clear. For as long as we remain members of the European Union, the rights and responsibilities that attract as a result of that membership will persist, but it is open to the member states to negotiate different arrangements if they think it is appropriate to do so, and we will see, once article 50 is triggered, exactly how those negotiations play out. The legal position, as I say, is that the rights and responsibilities of member states, and of course of citizens of those member states, will persist for as long as we are members of the European Union.

Female Genital Mutilation

2. Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): What steps the Government is taking to increase the number of prosecutions for female genital mutilation. [906000]

5. Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What steps the Government is taking to increase the number of prosecutions for female genital mutilation. [906004]

7. Andrew Gwyne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What steps the Government is taking to increase the number of prosecutions for female genital mutilation. [906006]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Government significantly strengthened the law via amendments to the Serious Crime Act 2015 to improve protection of victims through lifelong anonymity and to break down barriers to prosecution. The introduction of a mandatory reporting duty for front-line professionals to identify FGM cases of girls under 18 further improves opportunities for safeguarding and prosecution.

Lilian Greenwood: At the age of 11, Valentine Nkoyo was forced to go through female genital mutilation. Nineteen years later she set up the Mojatu Foundation, a social enterprise in my constituency, to use her own experience to raise awareness of FGM, help protect children at risk in the UK and support survivors. Mojatu’s current project aims to create a network of media-trained community champions to help tackle the issues affecting women and girls who are at risk or living with the consequences of FGM, to increase self-reporting. What engagement has the Solicitor General had with community organisations such as Mojatu to address the low level of prosecutions for FGM?

The Solicitor General: I pay tribute to the work of that community organisation and many others in the network who are fighting the scourge of FGM. The hon. Lady will be pleased to note that I and other members of the Government have regular engagement with community groups. The Department of Health has provided £4 million worth of funding over the past three years in order, among other things, to enhance community engagement so that awareness can be spread and victims need not suffer in silence.

Vicky Foxcroft: The lack of services to support victims of female genital mutilation is often seen as a reason why so many cases are left unreported. What effect will cuts of 24% to the Crown Prosecution Service have on the reporting of FGM cases?

The Solicitor General: May I reassure the hon. Lady that the Crown Prosecution Service places great importance upon the need to properly investigate and prosecute, where appropriate, crimes of FGM? It was regrettable
that in the years prior to 2010 not one single prosecution occurred. Cultural and other obstacles have prevented the effective investigation and prosecution of this scourge. The work of community groups and the resolution of the Government mean that that is gradually changing for the better.

Andrew Gwyne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Solicitor General will no doubt be aware of the European Commission guidelines on action against female genital mutilation. Notwithstanding the vote on 23 June for the UK to leave the European Union, can the Minister say whether it is still the intention of the Government to accept into British law the recommendations of the European Commission’s report?

The Solicitor General: With regard to the specifics, that matter needs to be considered carefully, and I will take that away with me. However, on the general principles laid out in that report, there is no doubt whatever that this Government remain fully committed to making sure that FGM is properly explained, properly challenged and properly dealt with, whether that is by prosecution, awareness in the community or other preventive measures.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): What steps are the Government taking to ensure that, in communities where, on occasions, a blind eye is turned to this obscenity, people understand that the law will be upheld and that the 130,000-odd young females who are affected will be protected in future, as this will affect others?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is right to reiterate that community engagement and community involvement will be key in making more progress on this area. I am glad to see that, certainly in England, the Department for Education has £2.25 million of funding to invest in awareness of and education about this issue, and I think that will also have a beneficial effect.

EU and Domestic Law: Separation

3. Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): What is his role in assessing the steps that will be required to separate EU law from domestic law.

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): My role in relation to the UK’s withdrawal from the EU is the same as my role in relation to other areas of Government business: I act as the Government’s principal legal adviser. In terms of seeking Law Officer advice in relation to the UK’s exit, the standard rules in the Cabinet manual apply. The Law Officers must be consulted by Ministers or officials before the Government are committed to critical decisions involving legal considerations.

Stephen Kinnock: Have the Government made an estimate of the cost of the vast number of lawyers and trade negotiators that are going to have to be hired to deliver our disentanglement from the European Union? If such an estimate has not yet been made, will the Attorney General please confirm by when he will be able to furnish the House with that information?

The Attorney General: We will undoubtedly need the best advice we can have and the best trade negotiators we can have. Of course, the Government already have some of that capacity, but the Department responsible is looking carefully at exactly what additional capacity we will need to gain, and as soon as it is in a position to give that information to the House, I am sure it will do so.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Our membership of the European Union has brought about substantial enhancements in our health and safety laws. Will the Attorney General guarantee that, with leaving the European Union, none of those health and safety laws will be weakened in any way?

The Attorney General: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there are many of those regulations that we will wish to retain, but of course the exercise of looking at exactly which parts of the canon of European law we wish to transfer into UK law, which we wish to adapt and which we may not wish to continue with at all, is a very lengthy one that we will need to continue with. But I agree with him that it will not, in all likelihood, be the case that all of those rules and regulations will be dispensed with altogether, and both businesses and those who are employed by them benefit from some of those measures.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Leaving the European Union will involve repeal of the European Communities Act 1972, which means all secondary legislation made under the Act will automatically fail unless it is re-enacted. Can the Attorney General tell us what steps are being taken, or will be taken, to ensure we have the necessary legislation to guarantee protection on important employment rights, such as transfers of undertakings and paid holidays for employees?

The Attorney General: May I first of all say that it is always nice to see anyone on the Labour Front Bench these days, but it is a particular pleasure to see that the hon. Lady retains her position?

I repeat what I said to the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds): it is clearly the case that the British Government wish to retain in some form some of the regulations and pieces of legislation she refers to. Of course, the exercise of determining which pieces of legislation is going to be time-consuming and complex, but I have no doubt that what this Government will wish to do is persist with high-quality protection for those in employment in this country, whether that is European legislation or, in future, domestic legislation.

Jo Stevens: I listened to the answer that the Attorney General gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds). Prior to being elected to this House, I represented families of people killed or injured at work. Most health and safety legislation providing protection for UK workers derives from EU law, and in his answer the Attorney General did not satisfy me that he will provide equivalent or better protection. Does he agree that workers need to be protected against injury, illness and death at work, and that workplace health and safety legislation is essential and not red tape? Will he give this House and, in particular, the families of those killed at work a guarantee that, at the very least, equivalent legislation and workplace protections will be urgently re-enacted?
The Attorney General: I agree that injury, illness and death at work must be prevented and dealt with through appropriate legislation and regulation. Of course, we had already sought to protect workers from those things prior to our membership of the European Union, and we will certainly seek to do so post-membership. I do not believe that it is beyond the capacity of this House to design legislation and regulation that will enable us to provide effective protection, and this Government are entirely committed to doing so.

**Economic Crime**

6. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of introducing a criminal offence of failure to prevent economic crime on the incidence of such crime. [906005]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): Under existing law, a company faces criminal liability only if prosecutors can prove that a sufficiently senior person knew about the criminal conduct. That can be extremely hard to prove, especially in large companies with complex management structures. That is why the Government will consult on whether the “failure to prevent” model should be extended to other types of economic offending.

Nigel Huddleston: In an increasingly globalised world, international co-operation and co-ordination is key to tackling often very sophisticated economic crime. What is the Serious Fraud Office doing to tackle those crimes, both domestically and overseas?

The Attorney General: The Serious Fraud Office does indeed attempt to engage with its counterparts abroad and a variety of agencies in other countries to do its work. Of course, as my hon. Friend may be aware, a “failure to prevent” offence is available in many other jurisdictions, and that is one of the reasons that we believe it is worth considering here.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Attorney General knows that I have campaigned for more much more vigorous action in this sector. I have called for proper resources to be given to the Serious Fraud Office, because it has become far too dependent on this country’s big accountancy firms, and that is the road to ruin and ineffective action.

The Attorney General: The Serious Fraud Office does indeed attempt to engage with its counterparts abroad and a variety of agencies in other countries to do its work. Of course, as my hon. Friend may be aware, a “failure to prevent” offence is available in many other jurisdictions, and that is one of the reasons that we believe it is worth considering here.

The Attorney General: I am aware of the hon. Gentleman’s campaigning record. As he knows, the amount of money that the Serious Fraud Office receives as part of its core budget has increased over the past few years and it will continue to increase. As he also knows, it has access to “blockbuster” funding for particularly large and unexpected cases. Of course, this is not just about money; it is also about the tools that the Serious Fraud Office and other investigators and prosecutors have at their disposal. That is one of the reasons why it is always worth keeping this area under review, which is what we are doing.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): May I caution the Attorney General? Setting up an offence of failing to prevent a crime committed by another is a very serious step in our legal system. It could affect many hon. Members in everyday life. For example, if they failed to prevent someone from shoplifting, would they be committing a criminal offence? These kinds of things are very difficult and I urge caution on the Attorney General.

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman is right to urge caution, but what we are proposing does not go anywhere near as far as he is suggesting. The types of offences under discussion are failures by corporate entities to prevent fraud, money laundering and the like. As he will know, there are already similar types of offences on the statute book in relation to bribery, and there will shortly be some in relation to tax evasion. This is an extension of a logical principle and it is designed to ensure that we are able to catch not just those in smaller businesses who are engaged in this kind of behaviour, but those in larger business too.

**EU Referendum: Protection of Human Rights**

8. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the decision to leave the EU on the protection of human rights. [906007]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): I consider the best protection of fundamental rights in the United Kingdom to be UK law. I am, therefore, confident that the decision to leave the European Union will not result in any reduction in the protection of such rights in the United Kingdom.

Jeff Smith: We now have a Prime Minister who has advocated withdrawing from the European convention on human rights. Can the Attorney General confirm whether that will be Government policy?

The Attorney General: As the hon. Gentleman quite correctly observes, we have a new Prime Minister and we also have a new Secretary of State for Justice. Both have been in office for only a little over a week, so the hon. Gentleman will have to be a little more patient.

**Hate Crime**

9. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Director of Public Prosecutions on the prosecution of hate crime. [906009]

10. Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Director of Public Prosecutions on the prosecution of hate crime. [906010]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I discuss this matter regularly with the DPP, and the Government will publish their hate crime strategy very shortly.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for his answer. Given the terrible terrorist atrocities in Nice, Paris and, recently, Germany, many people in this country are fearful that because of their religion or the colour of their skin, they will be the subject of hate crime. What assurances can my hon. and learned Friend give to those people that we will prosecute, to the full extent of the law, anyone involved in hate crime?
The Solicitor General: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the community work he does in his constituency. Hate crime of any kind, whether it is on the grounds of disability, race, religion, sexual orientation or transgender identity, has absolutely no place in our society. We are utterly committed to tackling hate crime.

Andrew Stephenson: A Member of the other place recently received a vile racist letter containing white powder, as did a number of mosques and Islamic centres representing a large Pakistani heritage community in Pendle. The long-term rise in Islamophobia is a serious concern. Will my hon. and learned Friend join me in condemning these racist incidents and advise me whether he believes that the separate recording of Islamophobia as a hate crime is likely to help to bring about successful prosecutions?

The Solicitor General: The incident that my hon. Friend describes is despicable and shameful, and we must stand together against such hate crime and ensure that it is stamped out. Religious hate crime has been recorded separately since April of this year, at the request of the Prime Minister in her former role as Home Secretary. That will give us a greater understanding of the nature of hate crime.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Reports of hate crimes rose exponentially—by 57%—following Brexit. Is the Solicitor General confident that the Crown Prosecution Service is adequately resourced to deal effectively with these reports and support victims?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady is right to note the alarming spike in incidents of hate crime that surrounded the recent referendum and the weeks subsequent to it. I reassure her that the CPS remains absolutely committed to prosecuting all types of such crime, which, frankly, have no place in our society.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Three weeks ago, I asked the former Prime Minister, and he agreed, to look into setting up a cross-party commission on hate crime following a sharp increase, as yesterday’s statistics revealed. Can the Solicitor General assure the House that that will be achieved as a priority? Will he offer his full support to my West Yorkshire cross-party initiative to tackle these terrible acts?

The Solicitor General: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, who speaks with eloquence and passion on these issues. Of course, I give her my full support with regard to the cross-party initiative in West Yorkshire. The former Prime Minister was right to emphasise that it is up to all of us, whichever side of politics we come from, to come together to tackle this scourge. We know what it can lead to, and therefore we have to stamp it out before it becomes something even more vile.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

EU Referendum: Hate Crime

1. Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the Government have taken to tackle hate crime against black, Asian and minority ethnic communities since the EU referendum.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): As the House has just discussed, hate crime of any kind, including that which is targeted at BAME communities, has absolutely no place in our society. I am sure I speak for the whole House when I say how appalled I am at the recent reported increase in hate crime. The Government are monitoring the situation and working across Departments and with the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and community partners to provide reassurance and send out a clear message that hate crime will not be tolerated, and that we will take action against those who promote hatred.

Christina Rees: I am proud of the Safer Neath Port Talbot partnership, which has been working to counteract the rise in hate crime since the EU referendum by holding hate crime awareness sessions in Neath communities. We should all say no to hate crime. What steps is the Minister taking to adopt such best practice and roll it out across the country to raise awareness and heal divisions in communities?

Justine Greening: I would be very interested to talk to the hon. Lady further about her experience of the work undertaken in her own community. As she highlights, one of the most effective things we can do to tackle hate crime is to work at community level to spread a message of inclusion, acceptance and tolerance across our society. The broader work happening in Government is being done not just through policing and the Home Office, but through the Department for Communities and Local Government and in my own Department—the Department for Education—through schools.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s answer. Lady further about her experience of the work under way in her own community. As she highlights, one of the most effective things we can do to tackle hate crime is to work at community level to spread a message of inclusion, acceptance and tolerance across our society. The broader work happening in Government is being done not just through policing and the Home Office, but through the Department for Communities and Local Government and in my own Department—the Department for Education—through schools.

Justine Greening: I would be very interested to talk to the hon. Lady further about her experience of the work under way in her own community. As she highlights, one of the most effective things we can do to tackle hate crime is to work at community level to spread a message of inclusion, acceptance and tolerance across our society. The broader work happening in Government is being done not just through policing and the Home Office, but through the Department for Communities and Local Government and in my own Department—the Department for Education—through schools.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The Minister's answer on online hate crime and online reporting is very welcome, but does she agree that, given the level of vile hatred that exists in certain parts of social media, it is absolutely essential for law enforcement agencies to chase it down and bring specific cases to court to ensure that there is no hiding place for the violent hatred that people pour on to social media?

Justine Greening: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. As crime moves on to different forums, including online, it is important that the police and the Crown Prosecution Service collectively take strong action to show that this
sort of behaviour across our country will not be tolerated and that we will take action against it wherever it raises its head.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): This may be a special occasion because all 12 Members on both the Government and Opposition Front Benches are female.

Last night, Kettering Borough Council passed a motion condemning racism, xenophobia and hate crimes. I am proud to be a member of Kettering Borough Council and to have supported the motion. Will my right hon. Friend encourage other local authorities to do the same?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman makes a very perceptive observation about the make-up of the Front Benches. The merit of his making it is that it is now on the record in Hansard forever.

Justine Greening: That is perhaps appropriate given that this is Women and Equalities questions. I should say that when the Government decided to draw Ministers from across Departments to answer these questions, there was no particular attempt to make sure we had an all-women list of Ministers, but it shows how things are changing with female representation in Parliament, alongside the fact that, as of last week, we have our second female Prime Minister.

To come to my hon. Friend’s very important question, I applaud Kettering Borough Council for its strong stance against racism. Part of ensuring that we stamp out hate crime and racism generally is not only for us to work strongly on the ground, but for people in positions of authority—community leaders included—to advocate the kind of inclusive society that we all want. The steps taken by Kettering Borough Council are particularly welcome, and I hope other councils follow suit.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Last Saturday, I attended an event in my constituency organised by a fantastic community group called Kumon Y’All. It was amazing to see people of many faiths and no faith engaging with each other through sport and other activities. Does the Minister agree that such events should be encouraged wherever possible, especially in these troubled times when we are seeing an alarming rise in hate crime?

Justine Greening: Yes, I do. We all have our own experiences of that at constituency level. My local Ahmadiyya Muslim community holds a peace conference every year, which brings together all faiths and all parts of our community, and it does a huge amount of fundraising, which also benefits our broader community. These are the kinds of examples of community leadership to which I was just referring. As MPs, we can play a real role in encouraging and supporting that when we see it happening in our own localities.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I would like to take this opportunity to welcome the Minister to her place. I am really proud to be one of the women on the all-women Front Benches. It seems that we might be taking over the world slowly but surely, which is fantastic.

We have heard from many Members on both sides of the House that there has been a dramatic wave of hate crime, hostility and intolerance towards EU nationals and members of the BAME community living in the UK. I have been encouraged by the many members of the public and people in high-profile positions who have challenged that behaviour and shown what a great multicultural Britain we are. However, like many across the House and the country I was dismayed and upset by The Sun columnist Kelvin MacKenzie’s disgraceful Islamophobic attack on the “Channel 4 News” presenter Fatima Manji. Will the Minister join me in making it clear that all parties in this House regard those comments as totally unacceptable? That being the case, will she also join me in urging Mr MacKenzie to make a full public apology, and The Sun and other media to be more responsible as to who and what they allow on their media outlets?

Mr Speaker: Order. As a result of the extreme seriousness of the matter I let the hon. Lady complete her question, but never again must she ask such a long question. I am afraid it was not just too long, but far too long, albeit very important.

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady has raised an important issue. This is not the first time that Kelvin MacKenzie has written and said things that are deeply controversial and to many people in our country deeply offensive, frankly. It is for him to decide how he wants to respond to the wave of criticism he has received since writing that article. From my perspective, I am proud that we live in a country where men and women are equal. That includes women having the right to wear what they want and to be able to get on in their job wearing what they want. In my view, that includes newscasters and journalists. We need to make sure we have some kind of consensus on not rising to the bait of people such as Kelvin MacKenzie. Frankly, I hope that we can treat his comments with the derision that they deserve.

Mr Speaker: The Minister has put the bigoted fellow in his place pretty comprehensively.

Single-tier State Pension

2. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What assessment the Government have made of the effect of the single-tier state pension on gender equality.

3. Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): What assessment the Government have made of the effect of the single-tier state pension on gender equality.

10. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What assessment the Government have made of the effect of the single-tier state pension on gender equality.
**Gavin Newlands:** I thank the Minister for that answer and welcome her to her place.

The new state pension will mean 350,000 women born between 1951 and 1953 retire on the old system, just before the new proposals come into force, whereas a man born on the same day will retire slightly later but receive a pension under the new arrangements. Does she agree that a pensions commission must urgently be established to end such inequalities?

**Caroline Nokes:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome.

Some £1.1 billion was committed at the time of the Pensions Act 2011 to reduce the maximum delay that anyone would experience in claiming their state pension. As a result of the Government’s triple lock, since April 2011 the basic state pension has risen by £570 a year. The Government’s position on this policy is very clear.

**Margaret Ferrier:** The current review of the state pension age by John Cridland is critical to ensuring that the existing inequalities in the current pension system do not plague future retirees. Does the Minister agree that discrepancies in life expectancy, including among some of the poorest women in society and across the UK regions, must be closely examined to prevent gender inequalities?

**Caroline Nokes:** I absolutely agree that it is important to prevent gender inequalities, but equally we have to be realistic and acknowledge that, across the country, people are living longer. If we want to carry on with a sustainable and affordable pension system we must equalise the state pension age for both men and women.

**Alan Brown:** Forget the triple lock and the other measures to protect pensions that the Minister has just promoted; the simple fact is that according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies in future 14% of women will receive a lower income at state pension age than they would have under the current system. What discussions is the Minister having with colleagues from the Department for Work and Pensions to try to prevent that?

**Caroline Nokes:** The new state pension is much more generous for many women. More than 3 million women stand to gain £550 a year by 2030 as a result of the changes.

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to welcome the Minister to her place? As a fellow feminist, I am sure she will agree that we are talking about our mothers’ generation, who broke down the barriers on equal pay. What message does it send to their daughters, a generation burdened with huge amounts of student debt, when their mothers are living longer and their state pension has been short-changed by the lack of transitional arrangements for their state pension? What incentive is there for younger women to trust the Government when it comes to saving for their future?

**Caroline Nokes:** I thank the hon. Lady for her welcome.

What we have seen from the reforms that the Government have made is that women of her age and my age are doing more now to save for their future than ever before. It is really important to reflect that some of the previous arrangements dated back to the 1940s. The world has moved on an incredible amount since that time and, I would argue, absolutely for the better.

**Caroline Nokes:** I absolutely agree that it is important to prevent gender inequalities, but equally we have to be realistic and acknowledge that, across the country, people are living longer. If we want to carry on with a sustainable and affordable pension system we must equalise the state pension age for both men and women.

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**Senior Executive Roles**

4. **Oliver Colville** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to increase numbers of women in senior executive roles.

5. **Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to increase numbers of women in senior executive roles.

7. **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to increase numbers of women in senior executive roles.

**The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening):**

This area is a real success story—we have more women on boards than ever before—but we know that we have got more to do. I fully endorse the business-led target of 33% of women on FTSE 350 boards by 2020. To achieve that, we have established the new independent Hampton Alexander review, which will have a particular focus on improving gender representation in the all-important executive layer of FTSE companies.

**Mr Speaker:** We now have the statutory male on the Government Front Bench. If the Minister for Schools had not turned up, I might have been tempted to invite the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) to make an appearance on the Front Bench, but I suspect that would have been a divisible proposition.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Only a matter of time.

**Mr Speaker:** Indeed.

**Andrew Stephenson:** Does the Minister agree that the 33% target of women on FTSE 350 boards is achievable?

**Justine Greening:** Yes, I do. We will need to take some steps, but so far the proposal of working voluntarily with business has seen some real progress, including a doubling of women on boards in the FTSE 350, from 9.5% in 2010, when the coalition Government came to office, to 22% now. The number of all male boards has also dropped from 152 in 2011 to 15 today. We have more to do, but I fully expect and hope that we can meet that ambitious, achievable target by 2020.

**Oliver Colville:** May I congratulate those on the Front Bench on the fantastic representation of women there? As my right hon. Friend the Minister knows, Plymouth University is taking the lead, in that half its board of governors are women. What is her Department doing to ensure more women are in senior leadership roles in universities?

**Justine Greening:** I should start by congratulating Plymouth University on making fantastic progress. I have been delighted to see that the latest “WomenCount” report on higher education—which the Government supported—showed that a third of governing bodies are now gender balanced. It is good that we now have a new code of governance in force, and the Higher Education
Funding Council for England has also set an aspirational target for 40% of women on governing bodies. An Athena SWAN charter mark has also been embraced as a sector standard, which I strongly support.

Lucy Allan: I, too, wish to add my congratulations to the Secretary of State, who has long been a role model for many women following behind her. I know that when she came into Parliament in 2005 it looked a very different place. What is her Department doing to ensure that women across the UK—not just in London—have opportunities to access senior executive roles, and can she assure me that those women will be encouraged into sectors other than those traditionally occupied by women?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend’s question has two parts that I should answer. First, we have just expanded the Women’s Business Council to 20 members. That includes organisations based in Scotland and Wales, so we are expanding and making sure that its geographical focus is UK-wide. Secondly, we are also changing the council so that it has greater representation of industries such as engineering, defence systems and construction. A good example would be Halfords Group, which is based in the west midlands near her constituency, whose board is 50% women and whose chief executive is female. We must champion best practice.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Will the Government lead by example by increasing the number of women in senior management roles in their Departments, agencies and other organisations in which they have influence, including the NHS?

Justine Greening: We are certainly going to try to make sure we do lead by example. The fact that we have our second female Prime Minister is a very good, strong and historic start. She recognise[s] that the public sector needs to make progress, as does the private sector.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Minister rightly mentions some of the progress made on getting female representation in boardrooms, but it is still a fact, which I think was researched by The Guardian, that there are more men called John—and a fine name it is, Mr Speaker—who are bosses in FTSE 100 companies than there are women running those companies. What more can the Government do to ensure that women see it as their role to run FTSE 100 companies?

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the problem. Despite progress, the reality is that only 18 of the FTSE 350 companies have female CEOs. We need to ensure not only that women aim high, but that, for example when women have children and come back into the workplace, their careers are not hindered and they can go on and get to the very top.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Of 318 female executive committee members in business, from a total of 2,038 across both genders, just 122 held roles with financial responsibility. Has the Minister had any discussions with companies about the possibility of mentoring women in business to enable them to achieve very senior roles?

Justine Greening: I really welcome that question, as somebody whose background is as a chartered accountant. Some accounting firms have done great work to pull through their best and brightest women. The point the hon. Gentleman makes is not just about the numbers, but seeing women in pivotal roles on boards. That is precisely the kind of next step we want companies to take.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her post. She is there on merit and the Conservative party has shown that women can get to the very top on merit. Can she give me an assurance that merit will always be the deciding factor on whether people are promoted to a role, irrespective of people’s gender, race or sexual inclination? When recruiting people, we should be blind to those things.

Justine Greening: I have great news for my hon. Friend: there are plenty of fantastic women out there who are ready, willing and able to get into the top jobs, so I assure him there will be no compromise on merit—indeed, dare I say, Mr Speaker, that we might see a raising of the performance levels?

Welfare Policy: Gender Equality

6. Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What assessment the Government have made of the effect on gender equality of their welfare policies. [905989]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): The Government set out our assessment of the impact of the welfare policies in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, with similar assessments for previous changes. Every Government policy change is carefully considered in line with legal obligations.

Alison Thewliss: Engender has said that, since 2010, £26 billion of cuts to benefits, tax credits, pay and pensions have been made, and that 85% of that figure has come from women’s income. The statement made yesterday by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions confirms that the two-child policy and, presumably, the rape clause are carrying on. They will also have an effect on women’s incomes. What is the Minister doing to redress the balance?

Caroline Nokes: It is really important to reflect on the economic statistics. There are more women in work than ever before and the roll-out of universal credit will ensure that being in work pays. The reforms we have made are assisting people into work and ensuring that women are at the forefront of that.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister will be aware of the continuing concern across the United Kingdom about the welfare reform proposals as they impinge particularly on women with young families. Will she keep under review that continuing concern, right across the entire country, to ensure that there is no continuing disadvantage to females, particularly those with young families?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about women with families. The Government’s investment in childcare support—the
doubling of free childcare from 15 to 30 hours for nearly 400,000 working parents of three and four-year-olds from September 2017—is an example of how we are making sure that women get back into work.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State and Ministers, new and existing, to their places. Prior to Brexit, the Secretary of State said that leaving the EU would cost the economy “a £36bn hit to tax receipts every year - it won’t just be public services squeezed, it will be our jobs, especially the livelihoods of people on lower incomes.”

We already know that 80% of welfare cuts fall on women. Can the Minister assure me that these cuts will not fall on women’s shoulders?

Caroline Nokes: As the hon. Lady will have heard my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister say yesterday, we are conscious that we have to make sure that the changes resulting from the EU referendum result work for everybody across society, and of course that includes women.

Equality and Human Rights Commission

8. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect of proposed changes to the funding of the Equality and Human Rights Commission on the work of that commission.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): The Equality and Human Rights Commission performs a very important and valuable role, and its appointed chair, David Isaac, and the board are well equipped for this task. The commission receives, and will continue to receive, sufficient funds to enable it to fulfil its full range of statutory duties.

Dr Huq: Will the Minister scotch the rumours that swingeing cuts to the EHRC budget are on their way—69% down on 2010, apparently? In this climate of post-Brexit racism and employment tribunal fee charges, it is needed more than ever, yet it is operating on less than the old Disability Rights Commission, which area comprises only one part of its multiple good works.

Caroline Dinenage: I am happy to scotch some of these rumours. When the EHRC was established in 2007, it was done without a full understanding of what it would need from a budgetary point of view and what it would cost. Nearly 10 years later, we have a much better understanding of its running and efficiency costs, and of course it saw a reduction in function in 2013. It has had to make significant savings, but at each stage, it has done so only after huge discussion with our Ministry, and it does not dispute that it will continue to be able to fulfil its statutory functions to the highest possible standard.

Welfare Policies: Effect on Disabled People

9. Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What assessment the Government have made of the effect on equality for disabled people of its policies on welfare.

Caroline Nokes: Spending on the main disability benefits rose by more than £3 billion in real terms during the course of the last Parliament, and overall spending on personal independence payments and disability living allowance will be higher this year in real terms than spending on DLA was in 2010. Our welfare reforms will ensure that the billions we spend better reflect today’s understanding of disability and offer targeted support to enable disabled people to live independent lives.

Marion Fellows: I welcome the Minister, a former colleague on the Education Select Committee, to her position. She will be aware of the Government’s long-promised Work and Health programme and of how disabled people are still awaiting publication of the Green Paper to map out what employment support will be made available for those with disabilities. Does she agree that her Government must now map out the timeline for publication and ensure that sufficient funding is made available for disabled people, who have borne the brunt of Tory austerity cuts?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Lady for her welcome. I very much enjoyed our time together on the Select Committee. She is absolutely right that we will publish a Green Paper to engage with disability groups and disabled individuals in order to build a strategy that works for them. It is critical that we get more disabled people into work. I spent some time before the general election as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the then Minister for Disabled People, and I know how hard he worked to promote the Disability Confident campaign and to ensure good examples of companies we could champion for showing that employing disabled people was good not only for disabled people but for the economy and individual companies.

Topical Questions

T1. [906015] Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.
The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): I am delighted to stand at the Dispatch Box today as the Minister for Women and Equalities. I want the House to know that this Government are committed to tackling inequality wherever it exists, so that we can have a country that works for everyone. We want to see opportunity levelled up, and we should never accept the status quo in a society in which, for example, some of our girls are undergoing female genital mutilation, others suffer from forced marriage and homophobic bullying still takes place in our schools. Tackling inequality was a central part of my work at the Department for International Development. I shall bring all that passion and practicality to my role as Minister for Women and Equalities.

Gavin Newlands: I welcome the new Secretary of State to her place. She will no doubt have heard the Prime Minister saying yesterday in answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson) that there is “always more to do” on the issue of violence against women. It is our view that the best way to achieve this is to ratify the Istanbul convention. Will the new Minister for Women and Equalities support the private Member’s Bill of my lion. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford), which commits the UK Government to doing more to protect women by ratifying that convention?

Justine Greening: I shall certainly take on board the hon. Gentleman’s points. I have spent much of the last three and a half years pressing internationally for stronger action to combat violence against women and girls, including, in March this year, attending the UN Commission on the Status of Women with the then Minister for Women and Equalities. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight this issue; I shall get back to him with an updated Government position.

T3. [906017] Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): I welcome the Ministry of Defence’s decision to allow women to fight on the frontline. Will the Minister explain what steps the Government will take to encourage women to take up these new posts?

Justine Greening: As my hon. Friend points out, the recent decision enables women to serve in the Royal Marines, the Royal Armoured Corps and Infantry and the Royal Air Force Regiment, so they will be able to fill ground close combat roles. We are putting in place a range of activities, working through the Ministry of Defence, including improved community engagement and recruitment processes. There is a target for 15% of all recruitments to be female by 2020.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): The Government took six long months to release their response to the Women and Equalities Committee report into transgender equality. LGBT campaigners have called the Government’s response “lots of polite words signifying precisely nothing”.

Will the Minister explain why the Government rejected the Committee’s main recommendation that the protected characteristic in the Equality Act 2010 regarding trans people should be changed to “gender identity”?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): I do reject that. The response to the Women and Equalities Select Committee took representations from more than 12 different Government Departments and public bodies. It was an entirely comprehensive piece of work, and a very large number of the recommendations were accepted and are being followed up, not least the commitment to look again at the Gender Recognition Act 2004, which trans people tell me is disturbing, long winded and in much need of reform. This Department takes its commitment to trans people very seriously.

T5. [906019] Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will the Minister join me in congratulating the organisers of the Essex women’s business experience 2016, a networking event in Southend? Will her Department do all it can to help and encourage women to set up their own businesses?

Caroline Dinenage: I am delighted to hear about the success of the Essex women’s business experience 2016, which I am told offered a range of workshops and networking opportunities to help inspire female entrepreneurs. The UK has been ranked as the best place in Europe for female entrepreneurs, and the Government are working hard to support them, not least through the £2.2 million women in broadband package to help support women to gain the skills and confidence they need to start their own businesses.

T2. [906016] Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I, too, welcome the Minister for Women and Equalities to her place. A report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies published just this week detailed that by 2014-15, two thirds of children classified as living below the poverty line were from families in which at least one parent was in work. Does the Minister agree that the Government should commit to abandoning the cuts to work allowances that will see low to middle-income families that are already struggling to keep their heads above water struggle even further, and focus on lifting the income of these working households to alleviate child poverty?

Justine Greening: One of the most important things to have happened under this and, indeed, the last Government is a dramatic fall in unemployment. Ultimately, as I know from my own childhood experience—my dad was unemployed for a year—the main thing that we can do to combat poverty is create jobs, but the hon. Lady is right to say that we now want to go beyond that, and enable people to do better in work. That is not only the right thing to do for them to improve their own household circumstances, but the smart thing to do to drive productivity in our economy.

T6. [906021] Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and the engineering sector in particular, fail to attract students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and also women. We must challenge those perceptions and stereotypes to deal with that problem, and with our productivity crisis. In September, I will host Wiltshire’s first engineering festival. Will the Secretary of State join me there?
Justine Greening: The festival sounds like a great initiative. I should be delighted if my hon. Friend would send me some details, and I will see if I can possibly come along to it.

The good news is that there were 13,000 more entries by girls to maths and science A-levels in 2015 than there were in 2010. However, we need to do more to challenge the perceptions about engineers, and about STEM careers, that too often put girls off studying those subjects.

T4. [906018] Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): A number of organisations have conveyed disappointment at the Government’s response to the findings of the transgender inquiry conducted by the Women and Equalities Committee. Stonewall has questioned the Government’s insistence on further evidence, believing that they have sufficient evidence to take proper action. Does the Minister accept the assessment that this has been a lost opportunity to ensure that all trans and non-binary people are clearly protected in law, and will she commit herself to working with them and others to achieve true equality for all trans people?

Caroline Dinenage: Again, I rebut the allegations that this has been a missed opportunity, given that we have taken on board so many of the Committee’s recommendations. The inquiry was a ground-breaking piece of work which has encouraged at least 12 Government organisations to look again at what they do, and to make some very strong and firm commitments to the transgender population to demonstrate that we support them and are paying attention to their needs.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Minister for Women and Equalities said a moment ago that she and the Government were committed to stamping out inequality wherever it happened. One of the starkest areas of inequality is sentencing: in every single category of offence, a man is more likely to be sent to prison than a woman. For example, 33% of men but only 15% of women convicted of child cruelty and neglect were sent to prison. Will the Minister write to the chairman of the Sentencing Council instructing him to treat women and men in the same way when they come before the courts?

Caroline Dinenage: As my hon. Friend knows, the judiciary are entirely independent of the Government, and rightly so. There are no gender preferences in sentencing guidelines; every sentence is handed down on the basis of the offence committed and any mitigating factors. As my hon. Friend also knows, although women who are convicted of the offence that he identified are less likely to go to prison, the sentences that they receive when they are sent to prison are longer than those given to their male counterparts.

T7. [906023] Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): We learnt this week that the Government had downgraded the pensions portfolio from Minister of State to Under-Secretary of State. Vast inequalities are facing women such as the members of the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign, and will face future pensioners following the change in the state pension. Is it not simply shameful that a Minister of State has not been appointed to deal with not just those inequalities, but the uncertainty that retirees will face following the vote to leave the European Union?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): The Department for Work and Pensions takes its responsibilities for these issues extremely seriously, and it has, in fact, been strengthened by having an additional “half a Minister”. I think it trivial to focus on a job title when what we are seeking to do is give qualified, competent and determined people the right roles.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her appointment. One of the key decisions that she will have to make very quickly relates to the close of the two-year period of discussion of caste discrimination. I have already written to her, but will she undertake to meet me and a delegation from the Hindu community who are determined to see that illogical discrimination removed from the statute book?

Justine Greening: I should be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman. I will locate his letter at the Department, and read it very carefully.
School Funding

10.34 am

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Education if she will make a statement on school funding.

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): I am firmly committed to introducing fairer funding for schools, high needs and early years. This is an important reform, to fairly and transparently allocate funding on the basis of schools’ and children’s actual needs.

As the written statement I have laid today sets out, this Government are investing record levels of funding for schools. With that investment, fairer funding will set a common foundation that will enable schools to maximise the potential of every child. They will no longer be held back by a funding system that is now arbitrary, out of date and unfair. Fairer funding will provide a crucial underpinning for the education system to act as a motor for social mobility and social justice.

The first stage consultations on national funding formulae for schools and high needs have been met with an overwhelmingly positive response from headteachers, teachers, governors and parents. I am also clear that this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for a historic change and therefore we must make sure we take the time to get the final approach right. I will therefore publish the Government’s full response to the first stage of the schools and high needs consultations, and set out my proposals for the second stage, once Parliament returns in the autumn. We will run a full consultation, and make final decisions early in the new year. Given the importance of consulting widely and fully with the sector and getting implementation right, the new system will apply from 2018-19. I will set out our full plans for a national funding formula for early years shortly.

I do understand that local authorities need sufficient information to begin planning their funding arrangements for 2017 to 2018. Local authorities need time to consult with local schools—both academies and maintained—to ensure that the funding they provide is being directed appropriately. As well as a fair system, schools and local authorities need stability and early notice of any changes in order to fulfil this important duty properly.

I have therefore confirmed today in my written statement that no local authority will see a reduction from their 2016-17 funding for schools or for high needs next year. Final allocations for that will follow in December on the basis of the latest pupil numbers, as usual. My written statement also confirms that for 2017-18 we will retain the minimum funding guarantee for schools, so that no school can face a funding reduction of more than 1.5% per pupil next year. As my written statement today confirms, I am determined to ensure both that we move to a fair funding system and that we do so in a measured and properly consultative fashion.

This will be a crucial part of delivering an education system that works for every child, no matter their background.

Neil Carmichael: The key point, as the Secretary of State has spotted, is that local authorities need to have time to prepare, and so too do schools. So the essential question is: can the Government really meet this timetable as set out, because that is the desire of all schools, particularly in England obviously, and it is of interest to every single Member of Parliament in England? I ask the Secretary of State to confirm when she really does expect this programme to be fulfilled, and how she is going to be sure that the next consultation period does not take quite as long as the previous one, because that took some three months to complete, and we still do not know where we are. Those are the key questions.

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is right that we want to strike a balance between moving rapidly towards a fairer funding formula while at the same time making sure we do so in a way that allows time not only for the details of that formula to be debated, because they will have a big impact on how it works effectively, but for local authorities, and indeed schools, to understand the changes and then prepare. That is the balance that I have tried to strike today.

I also want to act responsibly by ensuring that we do not rush into making changes without being fully sighted of their ramifications. I know that the debates in Parliament on the fair funding formula have resulted in long-standing frustration, and I am committed to resolving that, but I want to be sure that we do this effectively so that we do not have to revisit it because we have not got it right the first time.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): This Government’s attitude to school funding is woeful. Talk about last minute! Schools are struggling to cope with a 5% funding shortfall as a result of the Chancellor’s decision to increase national insurance and teachers’ pension contributions. Does the Secretary of State not recognise that pupil numbers are rising and that the shortage of teachers is growing? Will she put money into helping schools in the new formula? Only this Government could have the audacity to deliver real-terms cuts to school budgets across the country and claim that it represented fair funding. Will the Secretary of State publish in the Library of the House the amount that each local authority has received under the existing funding formula and the amount that it will receive following today’s announcement?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady has asked a range of questions. In summary, I have made it clear in my written statement today that no authority will lose funding either for schools or for high needs. This will enable us to give authorities a firm foundation on which to start planning for next year. The reality is that we have seen funding for schools and across education rising. This has been one of the areas that this Government and the coalition Government have sought to protect, and that has been evidenced in the results. We now have 1.4 million more children in good or outstanding schools, and we want that progress to continue.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Schools in Staffordshire are among the lowest funded in the country, and that is a matter of great concern for the headteachers I met last week. We understood that we were moving to a fairer funding formula from 2017-18, but it now seems that it will happen a year later. Will the Secretary of State make it absolutely clear that there could be transitional funding for 2017-18 for those authorities that are in a desperate position, as Staffordshire is?
Justine Greening: I recognise the pressures that my hon. Friend has just set out. This now gives us time to look at how we can deal effectively with those issues. We should also recognise that, while some schools are disadvantaged by the current formula, there will also be changes for schools under the new formula, and this gives us a chance to work effectively with them to ensure that there is a sensible and measured transition from the historical approach to the fairer, sensible approach that we are introducing.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Prior to the Secretary of State’s appointment, the noises coming out of the Department for Education suggested that London schools, in particular, would be seriously hit by the changes to the funding formula. Schools in Harrow have been advised that they will face a real-terms budget cut of between 3% and 8% as a result of the changes that her Department is considering. Can she offer any reassurance to the headteachers and parents in my constituency that that will not be the case?

Justine Greening: I have set out the details in my statement today of how we are going to proceed. As the hon. Gentleman says, some schools will see a change in the funding they receive as a result of our evening up the system and making it fairer, and these are important changes. It is therefore right that we should give ourselves the time to ensure that we can be effective in helping schools to deal with the changes well through a steady transition.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Given the optimism that schools in Chippenham felt on hearing the announcement of a fairer funding formula to rectify the ludicrous situation in which Wiltshire pupils receive over £2,000 less than pupils in other areas, will the Secretary of State confirm her commitment to the people of Wiltshire, including the 8,000 who signed my fairer funding petition?

Justine Greening: I can indeed; we are going to get on with this funding formula. To tie my hon. Friend’s point together with that of the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas), we now have a school funding system and a funding formula, but we also introduced the pupil premium, so we have additional mechanisms to ensure that the funding follows disadvantaged pupils with additional needs. We are now trying to get a system in place that is sensible about the core funding that schools receive and not based on frankly very old data. At the same time, the system should take account of the fact that we are able to top up through the pupil premium and other funding mechanisms when we particularly want to tackle disadvantage.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State confirm that, behind the warm words of fairer funding, school funding is still set to be cut by some 8% by 2020, as confirmed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, and that is coming at the same time as we see the threat of falling teacher numbers? Over a third of the children in this country currently leave school without five good GCSEs. Will she also confirm whether my local authority in Hounslow will see a funding cut? When will it know?

Justine Greening: I have been clear that no local authority will see a reduction in funding for 2017-18. My announcement today was clear that we will ensure that we have the time to bring in the fair funding formula effectively. The hon. Lady should not forget that, as I have set out, the introduction of the pupil premium means that we now have an additional £2.5 billion that will be specifically targeted to ensure that disadvantaged children get an additional top-up so that their schools can provide additional support.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I am delighted by the Secretary of State’s commitment to fair funding, which we clearly must get right, but I urge her to look urgently at transitional arrangements for counties such as West Sussex, which so desperately needs funding.

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend makes his point clearly. I assure him that we will look at a sensible approach for the transition period of 2017-18.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): As a former Select Committee colleague, I am delighted to see the Secretary of State in her new place and congratulate her. I urge her not to follow the example of her two predecessors; she should build a strong relationship with headteachers and teachers.

Will the Secretary of State make it absolutely clear that the pupil premium, which is hugely important for targeting funding at the most disadvantaged, will be protected in real terms when the changes are actually made?

Justine Greening: I remember my time on the Work and Pensions Committee with the hon. Gentleman with real fondness; I very much enjoyed it and learned a lot over those years. He mentions headteachers and teachers, and one of the first things that I did upon coming into this role was to pick up the phone and call the teaching unions to introduce myself and to set up initial meetings. I saw them briefly yesterday and I hope that I can have a constructive, productive relationship. The most important people who helped me to get educated were my teachers, to whom I will be eternally grateful. It is important that that is recognised.

On the pupil premium, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the funding rates are protected for the entire spending review period at 2015-16 rates.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Like me, my right hon. Friend was educated in a comprehensive school in Rotherham, so I warmly welcome her to her new role. While we can adjust the school funding formula in the short term, does she agree that the only way to increase school resources in the long term is to have a strong and growing economy?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. I am proud that both of us went through the state school system in Rotherham. I hope to be able to go back up there in the coming weeks and months to revisit some of the schools that enabled me to have the education that gave me a platform to try to reach some of the goals that I set myself. As he says, a strong economy is vital for ensuring not only that we have the funding to invest in our education system, but that the
children coming through our state school system have the opportunities to stretch themselves and to get the dignity of work.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I have written to the Secretary of State today and she will be receiving a letter shortly, so I hope that she will keep an eye out for it over the coming days.

Under the formula proposed by f40—the campaign for so-called fairer funding in schools—schools in north-east Lincolnshire suffer a £2.1 million cut, equivalent to over £100 per pupil a year. Does the Secretary of State agree that any formula that takes resources away from my constituency, in which no secondary school is currently rated outstanding, cannot be described as fair?

Justine Greening (Huddersfield) (Lab): I am in the job I am in. Most important asset is its people, which is why I am so delighted I am in the job I am in.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): My constituency contains significant areas of deprivation where there is underperformance, particularly among white working-class boys. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that nothing in this formula will have an adverse impact on the urban and deprived areas in my constituency?

Justine Greening: I agree with the hon. Lady that, over time, the current formula had simply become out of date. It was based on statistics that needed to be updated but, in essence, could not be, so it was time to take a fresh look at how we could make it fair. Her second point about focusing our efforts on the remaining parts of the UK where our education system is simply not delivering for our children is vital, and I do plan to focus on this.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State to her post and to her new role, whom I very warmly welcome to her new role, and I join the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who is in his place, to discuss the case for a local plan. His point is a really strong one.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I warmly congratulate the Secretary of State on her appointment, and she is absolutely right about this, because getting the fair funding follows the child, including in Kettering. We have created 600,000 school places, but we need to do more. I assure him that the funding formula statement that I am setting out today means we are in a better position going forward as we introduce it to make sure fair funding follows the child, including in Kettering.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Following on from my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who is in his place, to discuss the case for a rapid pupil turnover factor in the new formula. Will she confirm that that offer still stands and let us know which member of her team that meeting should now be with?

Justine Greening: That offer does still stand. I will get back to the right hon. Gentleman when we have worked out which Minister will attend the meeting.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I highlight to my right hon. Friend that Kettering has 8,879 primary places, rising to 9,677 by 2021, and 6,700 secondary places, rising to 7,637 by 2021? The county council says that all places will be full by the 2017-18 academic year. Will she ensure that when she looks at the issue of fairer funding, counties such as Northamptonshire and places such as Kettering, which have some of the fastest rates of house building in the whole country, get the funding they need to make sure we have enough school places for our children?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend raises the important issue that alongside many of the reforms we have introduced, a demographic shift is taking place which means we simply need to scale up our education system to keep pace with the number of children who need it. We have created 600,000 school places, but we need to do more. I assure him that the funding formula statement that I am setting out today means we are in a better position going forward as we introduce it to make sure fair funding follows the child, including in Kettering.

Secondly, I want my Department to be a central engine for social mobility more broadly. We need to challenge ourselves across government, and the Department for Education has a key role to play in this in saying that not only do we want children to be coming out of our schools better educated, but we want to make sure that the jobs and careers are there for them to be able to make the most of their potential. In the end, a country’s most important asset is its people, which is why I am so delighted I am in the job I am in.
Justine Greening: Again, this is an incredibly fundamental and important issue. I simply assure my hon. Friend that I am well aware of the need to ensure that, alongside all the other changes that are rippling through the education system, we have enough places for the children of our country, that we have enough teachers who can be in those classrooms teaching them, and that those teachers are outstanding and excellent and able to excite children in the classroom, help them learn and give them that best start in life.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to her place. I am sure that she is looking forward to her appearances before the Education Committee, probably starting in the autumn.

Fairer funding inherently means a process of redistribution, and many schools, heads and governors whose budgets are already at the margins and who are possibly looking forward to a 1.5% per pupil cut will be looking at that with real trepidation, particularly if they are already in receipt of tight budgets. There is a great deal of social need in an awful lot of schools in constituencies such as mine. It is mainly a shire county appeal that has come from the f40, and an awful lot of schools in the inner cities are wondering whether they will be on the receiving end of a cut.

Justine Greening: I recognise what the hon. Gentleman is saying. I underline the rationale behind why we introduced the pupil premium in the first place, which was to address many of the points that he has made. His comments underline why I am setting out this statement today. It is a substantial change in funding for all schools and therefore, ultimately, we need to get it right.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to her role, and welcome the inclusion of skills in her brief, as it has been too far from the centre of education policy recently.

Following on from the question of my fellow Hounslow colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), will implementation of fairer funding in Hounslow mean even greater cuts from 2018? Will the Secretary of State reassure the heads that we met a couple of weeks ago, as they are already having to make cuts to things such as A-level options, support for children with special needs, mental health counselling and support and so on?

Justine Greening: As I set out in my statement today, we will be launching a consultation on the detail of how we plan to introduce the funding formula. That will give both the hon. Lady and her local schools and teachers ample opportunity to be able to feed in their local perspective.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Representing as I do a cross-borough constituency, I know the unfairness of the current system. It cannot be fair that a child from Reddish in Stockport receives less funding than a child from Denton in Tameside—areas that share the same socio-economic characteristics, but are in different local authorities. Will the Secretary of State’s new fairer funding formula ensure that those children in Reddish are not disadvantaged just because they are in a more prosperous borough overall, and that their funding will be matched to those of the children in Denton?

Justine Greening: I think that I can confirm to the hon. Gentleman that the funding formula will start to iron out those sorts of inequities. Once we launch the second phase consultation, he will be interested to see the criteria and characteristics that we will incorporate to help ensure that we have a fairer approach on funding for schools in the future than we have had in the past. I will also set out for him the architecture of what we are trying to achieve. If we want to overlay significant additional resources in relation to deprivation, we want to do it in a smarter way and we want to use things such as the pupil premium to do it effectively. We recognise that we also need to have an element of understanding about the attainment, the eligibility for free school meals and other characteristics in the core funding formula too.
Business of the House

11 am

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for September?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): The business for the week commencing 5 September will include:

MONDAY 5 SEPTEMBER—Remaining stages of the Finance Bill (day 1).

TUESDAY 6 SEPTEMBER—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Finance Bill.

WEDNESDAY 7 SEPTEMBER—Opposition day (7th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 8 SEPTEMBER—A debate on a motion on scamming and its effect on vulnerable individuals, followed by a debate on a motion on the fourth industrial revolution. Both subjects were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 9 SEPTEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 12 September will include:

MONDAY 12 SEPTEMBER—Remaining stages of the Wales Bill.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 5, 8 and 12 September will be:

MONDAY 5 SEPTEMBER—A debate on an e-petition relating to EU referendum rules.

THURSDAY 8 SEPTEMBER—A debate on the missing Chibok schoolgirls in Nigeria.

MONDAY 12 SEPTEMBER—A debate on an e-petition relating to South Korea and the dog meat trade.

As this is the last business questions before the summer recess, may I not only wish colleagues in all parts of the House a restful recess and plenty of scope for constituency duties, but thank in particular the hard-working staff of this House, who serve Members of all political parties professionally and with dedication? I thank especially those who are retiring or otherwise leaving the service of the House at this recess. I hope I speak for Members on all sides when I say that Members in particular want to say a big thank you to Noeleen Delaney, one of the stalwarts of the Tea Room staff, who is retiring from the House of Commons after 30 years of service here. That is a record of service for which we are all very grateful.

Paul Flynn: It is a great pleasure to echo the words of the Leader of the House, particularly concerning Noeleen Delaney, who we all know as a valued friend, adviser and comforter over many, many years, and all the other members of staff who serve us so faithfully. After the recent days, we might consider accelerating progress on making this place a habitable accommodation for staff, many of whom have suffered severely in the recent heat, and perhaps we are thinking of following your example, Mr Speaker, of having less formal dress, which members of staff are forced to wear and which must be very uncomfortable at this time of the year.

It is right to note that we have lost the previous Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), now the Secretary of State for Transport. I regard it as a bit of a challenge—I have to pay tribute to his services, which were considerable over his period as Leader of the House. All these bouts of Question Time between Leaders of the House and shadow Leader of the House have their own personality. We remember with fondness the number of questions that the previous Leader of the House answered; his answers were occasionally related to the questions asked. What we will miss is the rapier-like wit of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), striking against the steamroller solidity of the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell.

It is, however, an undiluted pleasure to welcome the present Leader of the House, but I fear, as a long admirer of his, that his political career might not be on an upward trajectory in this appointment, because his career has been blighted by his solid devotion to the three R’s—rationality, restraint and reasonableness—which are not attributes that go well in his party at the moment. He was a splendid spokesman on European affairs, and the voice of sanity on so many issues, and I am sure that we look forward to his continuing with his restrained and mature performances at Question Time.

The right hon. Gentleman is also, I am told by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), the supreme champion on the television programme “University Challenge”. Not only did he win splendidly in his own time, but when he came back for a challenge of challenges, he was the supreme winner. It is great to know that he is doing this job from the platform of his own scholarship and knowledge. I believe that it is going to be a vintage year and a vintage period for a leadership of the House.

We have the Welsh Bill returning. It is a great shame that we did not get it right the first time. Welsh Bills are not just for St David’s day; they are for eternity, and we keep having them, and oh that we had got it right the first time. I am afraid that when the first Welsh Bill was introduced in the ‘90s, the attitude of this House to devolution reflected the fact that it was not then a popular cause; but although it is now universally accepted, devolution to Wales is still seen as a grudging gift—it is doled out in small parcels, a little bit at a time, and some is then pulled back. I hope that the generosity of the Government, in seemingly becoming completely converted to the idea of devolution, will be expressed in this Bill, with the support of all parties, and will help to serve the wellbeing of the people of Wales.

Baroness Altmann made a contribution this morning about her resignation, and I believe that all parties in the House should listen carefully to what she said. She gave as her reason for retiring that the parties—her party, which is the Conservative party, but this is also true of the Labour party—pay too much attention to their internal divisions, to the detriment of policy making. That is a very penetrating criticism of both the Conservative and the Labour party, which we would all do well to heed.

As we look forward to the new Session of Parliament, we should bear in mind the dreadful event that still casts a terrible shadow over this place. The family of Parliament was bereaved by the cowardly, brutal murder of one of our family members, Jo Cox, and the grief is still raw. We could do no better than ensure that our work here is illuminated and inspired by her thought: there are more things that unite us than divide us.
Mr Speaker: I thank the shadow Leader of the House. The Leader of the House is indeed perhaps our most illustrious egghead.

Mr Lidington: Mr Speaker, I am not sure how I respond to that compliment. I have felt, as a student of Elizabethan history, that the last three or four weeks have been the closest thing to living through one of the crises of the 16th-century Tudor court that any of us is likely to experience, and I suspect that events in British politics this year will have given Hilary Mantel ample material for her next trilogy.

I thank the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) for his warm welcome to me and for the deserved tribute that he paid to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, who indeed did act as a champion of the House, not just in the Chamber, but in the many exchanges behind the scenes that fall to the Leader of the House. I, I hope on behalf of the House, wish him well in his new responsibilities.

Listening to the shadow Leader of the House, I felt that the three R’s he laid out before us—reasonableness, rationality and restraint—summed up our Prime Minister’s approach to Government and to politics. In fact he may have presented us with a motto for my right hon. Friend’s Administration and approach to Government.

The shadow Leader of the House is a man of undimmed ambition who has leapfrogged on to the Opposition Front Bench after so many years of parliamentary experience, and for whom two shadow Cabinet roles are just a bagatelle—something with which he can easily cope. I think his ambition should not be restrained, even now. I have been studying his remarks and I note that he said of the Leader of the Opposition that it is very difficult to see how he can unite the Labour party, and he said:

“We’re in the worst position we’ve been in the whole history of the…party”.

I think there is an embryonic leadership campaign there. I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to disregard any taunts and to throw his hat into the ring while there is still time.

On the serious point that the hon. Gentleman made about the legacy of Jo Cox, the security risks that Members face need to be considered very carefully and action needs to be taken. Without going into details on the Floor of the House, I can say that there has been agreement among members of the House of Commons Commission that new measures should be taken. We will be able to go into further details very soon after the House returns in September.

Finally, I hope that Members of every political party would look to Jo Cox and see someone—whether we agreed or disagreed with her on a particular issue—who was motivated above all by a drive to improve the lot of the people whom she served in her constituency, nationally and globally. In that sense, I think there could be new examples for us to follow.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on his deserved promotion to the position of Leader of the House. May we have an early debate about the troubles of Southern rail, which are causing significant problems not only for commuters south of London, but for my constituents coming in from Leighton Buzzard? Does he agree that the way to relieve the problems of commuters south of London is not to wreck the rail service north of London, but to pay attention to what needs to be done south of the river?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport and the new Rail Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), have already met the operators responsible for Southern train services and Network Rail. They have emphasised the need for the operators to work with the trade unions to try to find a rapid and full solution to the current dispute, which is causing misery to many thousands of passengers every day. The Secretary of State is making the issue his personal priority and I hope very much that there will be a satisfactory resolution soon.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the new Leader of the House for announcing the business for the week that we return after recess. I warmly welcome him to his new role. He comes with a huge reputation of working consensually across the House, and he is also known as one of the House’s truly nice guys. Scottish National party Members are investing a lot of faith in him and we have great ambitions that he will be a reforming Leader of the House.

May I gently suggest a couple of places where the new Leader of the House might want to start? First, get rid of English votes for English laws. It is absolutely loathed in every part of this House other than in the confines of the Conservative party. It is totally associated with his predecessor. I ask the right hon. Gentleman to unite the House again around one class of Member of Parliament. Do not divide us by nationality or geography. That should be his first task.

Secondly, what about the procedures of this House? Did you know, Mr Speaker, that we waste one day a week by just voting in this House? That is an absurd waste of time. Bring this House into the 21st century.

Next, I turn to the circus down the corridor. What always gets me is that all these Tory Brexit dudes go on about imaginary unelected European bureaucrats, but down the corridor there are actual unelected Lords. Come on, new Leader of the House; let us make some progress towards abolishing them.

You will have noticed, Mr Speaker, all the small children with Scottish accents who have been kicking around the House recently. That is because the Scottish schools have been on holiday for almost three weeks. The Leader of the House saw an example of this recently, when he had to come to the Scottish Affairs Committee. He spent an hour in the charming company of Rebecca and Harris, the lovely children of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), because she had nowhere else to put them.

We are in recess for almost three months of the year. Surely, it is not beyond the wit of a member of staff in the office of the Leader of the House to design the summer recess to accommodate all the school holidays of the United Kingdom, not just the Scottish ones. My hon. Friends had to leave their children at 10 o’clock on Monday evening so that they could vote against the evil
weapons of mass destruction, bringing to life our slogan, “Bairns not bombs”. Something has to be done about that.

Lastly, Mr Speaker, may I wish you and all the staff a fantastic recess? I pay tribute to Noeleen Delaney, who has served us all with such professionalism over, I believe, the past 30 years. I also say, “Have a happy civil war” to my friends in the Labour party over the summer. I do not know what we will be returning to—whether it will be just one Labour party, or whether a social democratic and Blairite party will emerge—but all I can say is that we will be back as the real and effective Opposition come September.

Mr Lidington: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words of welcome, and I look forward to working with him and with members of his party in my new capacity. On English votes for English laws, as I said when I gave evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee earlier this week, the Government review promised by my predecessor will start 12 months after the introduction of the EVEL procedures. The Select Committee on Procedure has also said that it is undertaking a review of these arrangements. I think the sensible thing is to see how the new EVEL arrangements go for the first year, take stock of what the Government and the Procedure Committee conclude, and come to a decision at that point.

On the hon. Gentleman’s question about voting procedures, although I can understand the point that he is making—for those of us who went through the Aye Lobby on Monday, it took a lot longer than it would have done to go through the No Lobby with him—there are advantages, as well as drawbacks, to our current arrangements. I would not lightly want to lose the opportunity for Back-Bench Members from all parts of the House to grab hold of Ministers, at a time when no civil servants are present, to make representations on behalf of their constituents. Having looked at voting procedures in the European Parliament and elsewhere, I do not think that they are perfect either. I was told earlier this morning that in the New Zealand Parliament, the Government Chief Whip can cast a vote recording the votes of his entire parliamentary party. I suspect that such simplification would not command widespread support, although it might appeal to those who are sitting to my right.

On recess dates, I undertake to have another look at the matter. I understand the problems that the current arrangements cause for colleagues from Scotland and Northern Ireland, but even now it is not the case that our current recess arrangements suit parents with children at schools in different local authorities in various parts of England. I think it will be very difficult ever to craft a system of recess dates that gives everybody everything that they would like to see, but I will take a fresh look at that in view of what the hon. Gentleman has urged.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend, but will he resist the attempt by SNP Members to urge less EVEL? Many Conservative Members would like much more EVEL.

I echo the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) about Southern. Will the Leader of the House ensure that we have a debate in Government time about the appalling situation that my constituents and those of many other Members face because of the disruption on Southern? Will he urge our right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary to do everything he can to sort this out, and ensure that he is fully apprised of the real causes of the disruption at the moment? Although the causes include network failures, the principal one is what is in effect a work to rule driven by the rail unions, which are resisting perfectly sensible changes in the rail industry.

Mr Lidington: It is true that if the trade unions returned fully to work, that would ease the situation enormously to the benefit both of passengers using Southern services and, as our hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire pointed out, of passengers elsewhere whose services are being interrupted to try to give extra support to Southern. I undertake to contact the Transport Secretary and to make him aware of the points raised by my right hon. Friend. I hope that by the time we return in September, this dispute will be over and services will have been restored to an acceptable level so that we will not need to have such a debate. I am sure the Secretary of State will want to consider carefully the points my right hon. Friend has made.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Fear, pressure and unrealistic expectations are the words that workers at Sports Direct use about their employment. May we have a debate on zero-hours contracts and the exploitation of workers in the retail industry, where something is going badly wrong?

Mr Lidington: The management of Sports Direct have given evidence to one of our Select Committees, and its report will no doubt inform debate in the House in the future. I must say to the hon. Gentleman that this Government legislated to outlaw exclusivity clauses in zero-hours contracts. For all the protestations from Opposition Members, no such action was taken during the 13 years of Labour Government.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): A terrible school bus accident happened at the Corbystock crossroads in my constituency last Thursday. Thankfully, everybody has now been discharged from hospital. Will the Leader of the House send his best wishes to the parents, pupils and teachers of Prince William School and Oundle Primary School? Will he join me in calling on Northamptonshire County Council to review the situation at the crossroads? At the same time, will he thank our remarkable emergency services for all they did? May we have a debate on our return to congratulate them on their efforts?

Mr Lidington: I am sure my hon. Friend’s constituents will appreciate the tribute he has paid to his local emergency services. I certainly send my best wishes to the two schools concerned and to all who were caught up in the accident. It is obviously for the county council to decide whether it wishes to review the highways issues involved, but in view of what has happened, it would be sensible for any local authority to take a fresh look at such things. With regard to a debate, I am sure my hon. Friend is already skilled enough in how to seek Adjournment debates to raise constituency issues of this type.
Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Harold Wilson said that a week is a long time in politics, but with recent events in this place, it feels as though 10 minutes is a long time in politics. However, time is of the essence for the Backbench Business Committee. I welcome the Leader of the House to his place and thank him for confirming the business on 8 September. To be able to decide about Back-Bench debates on 15 September, if we are to be allocated time on that day, we will have to do so on Tuesday 6 September. Will he confirm that day through the usual channels—as soon as possible, please—so that we can do that on 6 September?

Mr Lidington: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words of welcome. I will certainly make sure that the Backbench Business Committee gets proper notice so that it is able to plan.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am somewhat worried about the European Minister—sorry, the Leader of the House. Since his appointment to that role, he has had a rather nasty gash on his forehead. A nasty rumour has been going around that when he was appointed the Prime Minister said to him, “I have some good news, David. You will no longer be the Minister for Europe,” to which he replied, “That’s great; I won’t have to answer questions from my hon. Friends the Members for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), for Bury North (Mr Nuttall), for Shipley (Philip Davies) and for Wellingborough (Mr Bone),” but when she told him that instead he was going to be Leader of the House, he started banging his head against the wall. Will he confirm that that is not true? I warmly welcome him to his post.

Mr Lidington: I confirm that it is not true, and nor is the gash the product of a farewell visit to the European Scrutiny Committee. I am always overcome with joy in the company of my hon. Friend and our other hon. Friends whom he mentioned. Even where, as was the case over the issue of Europe, there are genuine principled differences between us, it is important that in this place we acknowledge that those differences are held honestly, honourably and on a principled basis. We should respect one another even when our views differ profoundly.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I join in the hymns of welcome to the new Leader of the House. When might we have a debate about the Government’s new life chances strategy and how it might help children of alcoholics? Like many other hon. Members, I suspect, I have come across some of the very serious problems he has described in my constituency casework. I undertake to let my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education know about the priority the right hon. Gentleman places on the subject and I am sure he will get a response from the Department.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Following on from the point raised by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), will the Leader of the House send out a search party to find the updated drugs strategy, as it has gone missing in Government? May we have a statement to reveal how the Government will tackle the growing funding crisis in residential rehab across our country, with cuts of more than 50% to drug treatment budgets? Some areas, such as Birmingham, are not making any referrals to residential rehab, which means the end of the life chances of many vulnerable adults.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes his point powerfully, and I shall draw his comments to the attention of the Secretary of State for Health.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): The EU Referendum Act 2016, which we debated in the last parliamentary Session, contains no requirement for the Government to implement the result of the referendum or for setting a time by when we should trigger article 50. A lot of constituents have come to see me because they are concerned about the implications of that. This week I met local farmers, who are particularly concerned about EU funding streams and are asking for assurance on that issue. Will the Leader of the House clarify whether we will have an opportunity to debate those very important matters as soon as possible after we return from the summer recess?

Mr Lidington: The principle of parliamentary sovereignty means that it is ultimately for Parliament to determine our membership of the European Union but the Government have consistently said and have acted on the basis that the referendum outcome would be decisive and they would honour the result, whatever it turned out to be. That is the approach that the Government intend to take; the country would expect no less.

The hon. Lady raised a serious point about agriculture. That is very much at the top of the priority list for the new Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Along with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary will be considering how to address the question of the next few years of farm funding while we are still in the EU, in particular for those programmes that might carry over beyond the actual date of exit. I am sure that Parliament will have opportunities to debate that and other matters soon after the recess, and of course my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union will have a dedicated Question Time, when the hon. Lady and others will be able to press him on such matters.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the distribution of funds by local enterprise partnerships? The LEP in our area had Southend as No. 4 on its list and we have dropped off the radar dramatically. Something needs to be looked at there.
Mr Lidington: My understanding is that that was an internal decision by the local enterprise partnership for south Essex, and I encourage my hon. Friend to make representations—I am sure he will do—on behalf of his constituents to the LEP. If that is not successful, I am sure that the relevant Minister in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be keen to hear from him.

Jim Dowd (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): May I too welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new post? I well recall the many happy although fruitless hours we spent together on the original European Union (Referendum) Bill. Whatever happened to that? May I support the hon. Members who have raised the issue of the Thameslink Railway is providing? The Mayor of London has written to the Secretary of State for Transport to say that he is prepared to take on the Southern franchise. In arranging a debate in Government time on that matter, will the Leader of the House prevail on the Secretary of State for Transport to accept the Mayor’s offer or at least to look into it in great detail?

Mr Lidington: I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will want to consider all options, but it is not the transfer of the franchise that is the answer: it is for the management to get on top of the operational difficulties that do exist and for management and unions to sort out the industrial dispute that is aggravating matters at the moment.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I echo the words of many right hon. and hon. Members in welcoming my right hon. Friend to his place. I also welcome his deputy, and I am sure that they will make an excellent team. I understand that the newly appointed Secretary of State for Transport is visiting Derby this afternoon to discuss the midlands engine. May we have a debate not just on improving the roads in the midlands, but on ensuring that the rail industry is given the same level of investment? It is also important to note that “midlands” means east as well as west midlands.

Mr Lidington: I thank my hon. Friend for her words of welcome to my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House and me.

Yes is my answer. The very fact that the Transport Secretary is visiting Derby today, so early in his tenure, is a visible demonstration that the midlands engine is about the east midlands just as much as the west midlands. The strategy that the Government plan to have in place by March next year is multimodal, in the jargon—it will cover rail as well as roads.

Martyr Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): When my constituent, Mrs Clark, became a kinship carer on the tragic death of her daughter, the backdating of child tax credit payments beyond three months was only done after a protracted process culminating in two appeals to the Adjudicator’s Office, adding to the stress on the family. Will the Leader of the House set aside Government time for a debate on the payment of child and other relevant benefits to new carers after a lone parent dies?

Mr Lidington: The details that the hon. Gentleman has given about that particular case concern me, and I am sure that the relevant Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions will be happy to look into it to see whether anything went wrong in the system.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his place. I wonder whether he has had a chance to look at early-day motion 351 in my name regarding the persecution of religious minorities in Bangladesh.

[That this House condemns the recent killings of innocent Hindu priests in Bangladesh; urges the government of Bangladesh to take strong steps to tackle the increasing levels of violence against minority Hindu communities in the region and ensure their safety and security; and urges the Government to encourage the government of Bangladesh to put perpetrators of violence against religious minorities in the region on trial as soon as possible.]

This week, I hosted a meeting commemorating the Jagannath Hall massacre 45 years ago. Still we see Hindu priests murdered and other religious minorities massacred. May we have a debate in Government time on reordering the overseas development aid we give to Bangladesh, so that more money is aimed at the security of minorities rather than just capacity building?

Mr Lidington: I will draw the attention of the Secretary of State for International Development to my hon. Friend’s last point. Bangladesh is experiencing a wave of violent terrorism driven by Islamist extremism that is targeting religious and ethnic minorities, as well as LGBT people and independent journalists and editors. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and his team at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are in regular contact with Ministers at all levels in the Bangladesh Government. We will continue to do everything we can to try to help the Bangladesh Government to bring about an end to these appalling incidents.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I detect a new acronym creeping into Government language: PBO. That does not stand for the Public Bill Office, but post-Brexit opportunities. One of the most important tools for business is connectivity, whether from Scotland, Northern Ireland or the regions into London, or from London to international markets. If we are going to maximise Britain’s opportunities, we need the Government response to the Davies commission. It is long overdue and the Prime Minister dodged it yesterday. Will the Leader of the House—I welcome him and his deputy to their new positions and wish them success—tell us whether he has had any indication from No. 10 or the Department for Transport that we might have a statement in September, rather than later?

Mr Lidington: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words of welcome. The new Transport Secretary and the new Prime Minister will obviously want to brief themselves thoroughly on the Davies commission conclusions and the other issues around this very important decision. I know that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister believes it would be right to take the decision as soon as possible. As soon as the Government are in a position to make a statement to the House, we will do so.
Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I am delighted that my right hon. Friend is in his post, as I am that the Deputy Leader is in his post. I welcome him to the Front Bench. May we have a debate on the welfare of dogs? There is much material that could be used in such a debate, such as: the appalling practice of dogfighting; the terrible distress caused by the theft of dogs, which has happened to a number of my constituents; and the great deal of distress experienced by dogs left in cars during very hot weather. Last weekend, the RSPCA's 24-hour emergency helpline received 106 reports of dogs left in hot environments. I suspect that that figure will be much higher for this week, which has been unseasonably hot. May we have a debate to draw attention to the welfare of dogs and how such things can cause unnecessary distress?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend raises an important issue for those of us who are concerned about animal welfare. In his reference to how people sometimes leave pet dogs in cars in hot weather, he alluded on the fact that often for such issues it is not a matter of a need for new legislation, but a matter of people recognising that they have a responsibility to care for the animals they own. If a debate enables my hon. Friend to highlight that, I can see the benefit of such a debate taking place. I would direct him towards either the Adjournment debate process or the Backbench Business Committee, where he might find those opportunities.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I congratulate the Leader of the House, and may I congratulate him on winning next year’s prize for the most reduced carbon footprint? May I also join in the tributes to Noeleen Delaney who, like all the staff in the House, serves us with dedication and discretion. She is ready with consideration and chat, but—typical of Donegal decency—never gossip.

Will the Leader commission a study of how many amendments and groups of amendments this Chamber discharges without any debate whatever, leaving it to the unelected fur-ocrats up the building here to get the enhanced reputation as the revising Chamber and the key amending Chamber? In this age of taking back control, can this Chamber take more control of the legislation that passes through Parliament?

Mr Lidington: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words of welcome. He raises an important point. Ministers have a responsibility to ensure that Bills brought to the House are technically sound, that the policy has been properly worked out and that there is no ambiguity about the intention of particular clauses. The House collectively then has a responsibility, through the programming process, to ensure that Bills are properly debated and that we do not waste time simply scoring party political points, particularly in Committee and on Report. It then has a responsibility to allocate time fairly so that all aspects of the Bill can be properly considered. There are lessons for the Government but also for the House collectively on how we might do our job better.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Many constituents have raised with me the awareness and treatment of Lyme disease, with which I was recently diagnosed after a constituent came to my surgery and raised my own awareness of the symptoms. There is a stark issue here concerning both awareness and clarity about the treatment that is available and should be used. Will the Leader of the House please consider a debate in Government time on this important issue?

Mr Lidington: I am aware from a constituency case of my own of some of the uncertainties regarding the available treatments. I will make sure that the relevant Health Minister is aware of my hon. Friend’s concern and responds to her.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I congratulate the Leader of the House on his appointment. There seems to be a growing consensus across the House in opposition to the proposals by the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) to privatise Channel 4. Most recently, we heard the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), the former Culture Minister, on Radio 4 yesterday. When will the Secretary of State come to the House with a statement confirming that this valuable asset will be kept in public ownership?

Mr Lidington: This will be one of the many items on the agenda of my right hon. Friend the new Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. I am sure she will want to spend the summer considering this and other matters and then report her decisions to the House as soon as she is able.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I also welcome the Leader of the House and his deputy. May we have a debate on the better care fund and, in particular, how it applies in Staffordshire? We have seen £15 million not given to the county council, as a result of which services such as drug and alcohol services—already referred to by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes)—and numbers of health visitors are set to be drastically reduced.

Mr Lidington: A balance needs to be struck between the responsibility of central Government to set the overall budget for local authorities and the national health service and those of local authorities and NHS managers to ensure that their services are structured in a way that maximises the value received for each pound spent. That sometimes means a need for significant reforms in how services are delivered, but I take note of what my hon. Friend says about Staffordshire. I am sure he will want to seize the opportunity during Health Question Time and Communities and Local Government Question Time, after we return, to make those points directly to the responsible Ministers.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I welcome the new Leader of the House to his position. He has the respect of the entire House because of the courteous way he always operated in his previous ministerial positions. I also pay tribute to Noeleen Delaney. Her 30 years of way he always operated in his previous ministerial positions. I also pay tribute to Noeleen Delaney. Her 30 years of
out of the country for 54 weeks because she was involved in a serious car accident in Australia seven months into a trip to Australia on a year-long visa. It took a long time in intensive care, a long time in the spinal injuries unit and a long time to co-ordinate both the specialist spinal unit in Glasgow and landing certificates in Dubai to get her home. This meant she was 54 weeks out of the country. This, surely, is not fair, and a reasonable person would see that it was not fair. She is now in a wheelchair, requiring additional support, so I hope that the Minister will be able to look at the situation.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s kind remarks. Clearly, there have to be rules that govern the payment of all kinds of welfare benefits. The hon. Gentleman describes a case in which he felt there were powerful extenuating circumstances. If he writes to me with the details of the case, I shall refer it to the relevant Department for Work and Pensions Minister and ensure that he gets a response.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): The Leader of the House is clearly enjoying his new role, and I warmly congratulate him on his appointment. The future of health care in Shropshire has been on hold for three years while a programme board, known as “Future Fit”, deliberates on possible closures to A&E. It continues to be unable to reach a decision and seems to be in a state of near paralysis. This has cost over £3 million and caused real anxiety to my constituents and poor morale at the Princess Royal hospital in Telford. Please may we have a debate on the issue?

Mr Lidington: On the basis of my hon. Friend’s description of the situation in Shropshire, it seems to me that what is needed is certainty that the local NHS management, including the senior clinicians who will be part of those teams, will decide on what they want and provide justification for any changes. As for a debate, this strikes me as something that might well fall within the scope of an Adjournment debate that either a ballot or Mr Speaker might be able to make available to my hon. Friend.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Today’s Order Paper shows a written statement on the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, although I do not think it has yet been published online. The Education, Skills and the Economy Sub-Committee has already expressed regret at the closure of the commission. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending its achievements, since its establishment in 2008, under its two chairmen, Sir Mike Rake and Sir Charlie Mayfield? In view of its record of independent analysis and advice to successive Governments, is it not a shame that the enthusiasm for independent analysis and advice of the Government who set up the commission is not shared by the current Government?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to join the right hon. Gentleman in expressing thanks to the commission and its leadership for all the work that they have done. It is also a fact, however, that from time to time, Governments of all political colours need to review the institutions through which policy is delivered, and this is one of those occasions.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I welcome and congratulate the new Leader of the House and the Deputy Leader of the House on their well-deserved promotions. I look forward to my right hon. Friend’s appearance before the Procedure Committee. May we have a debate on the ministerial statement issued by the Prime Minister on Monday about the changes to the machinery of government and, in particular, the establishment of the new Government Departments? This would give Members across the House an opportunity to consider what consequences flow from these changes. The Leader of the House briefly mentioned that time would be set aside for questions, but will it be a Question Time for one Department or each Department and how long will it be for? Are the Government going to create new Select Committees so that Back Benchers can scrutinise these new Departments? May we have a debate in Government time as soon as possible?

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his welcome. I look forward to the opportunity of appearing before the European Scrutiny Committee—I mean the Procedure Committee.

Mr Nuttall: The right hon. Gentleman has been released from the European Scrutiny Committee.

Mr Lidington: I have indeed.

I have had a meeting with the Chair of the Procedure Committee, our hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), and I hope that there will be a fruitful dialogue between my office and the Committee. I can confirm that there will be dedicated question times for the new Departments, and that a schedule of those question times should be available very soon, if it has not already been published. We shall also need to establish new Select Committees, and I hope that we can proceed with that as soon as possible in the autumn. Ultimately, however, it is a matter not for the Government, but for the House.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I, too, welcome the Leader of the House. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who must be the longest-serving spokesperson for matters concerning the Leader of the House in this Parliament.

Will the Leader of the House take a fresh look at the Procedure Committee’s report on private Members’ Bills? The current system is completely discredited, despite the massive success of Scottish National party Members in the ballot. We urgently need a debate and a vote on reform, in Government time.

Mr Lidington: That is one of the issues that the Chairman of the Procedure Committee raised with me. I said that, as a new Leader of the House, I would take a fresh look at it, but, as I think the hon. Gentleman will understand, I am not going to make any commitments either way at this stage.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend and his Northamptonshire deputy, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), on their promotions.
As one of his first acts in office, will my right hon. Friend arrange for the Secretary of State for Health to make a statement when we return from the recess on the financial situation of hospitals in high-growth areas? Kettering General Hospital is fantastic, and the directors, clinicians, nurses and ancillary staff do a tremendous job, but its financial deficit was £6.7 million last year, it is £11.2 million this year, and it is projected to be £15 million next year. Last year almost 400,000 people went to our local hospital for treatment, and the number of houses being built and the rise in the local population are placing an incredible strain on it. Something needs to be done, so will the Leader of the House arrange for the Secretary of State to make that statement?

Mr Lidington: I thank my hon. Friend for his welcome. As a Member who represents another high-growth area, I am very familiar with the issues that he has raised. Such issues need to be viewed holistically, because it is a question of looking not simply at the provision of hospital services but at the treatment of health services as a whole. Sometimes the pressures can be eased by some sensible reconfiguration of services overall, but account must be taken of the way in which medical science has moved on, and the fact that more people can now be treated as out-patients or day patients rather than having a long in-patient stay. However, I will draw my hon. Friend’s points about Kettering to the attention of the Health Secretary.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I, too, welcome the new Leader of the House.

In 2012, my 14-year-old constituent Elly Blacknell was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, and her treatment included having her leg amputated above the knee. Recently Elly relapsed and asked to re-access Mifamurtide, a drug that she had been prescribed but could not tolerate when she was younger. Her oncologist, Professor David Walker of Nottingham Children’s Hospital, has acted as an advocate for her, but has been unable to find a way through the NHS system of funding, although Mifamurtide is the first drug to be launched specifically to deal with such tumours for 30 years. May we have a debate on the difficulties involved in introducing new drugs to treat rare tumours in children, which are so badly needed by remarkable young people like Elly?

Mr Lidington: For obvious reasons, I am not familiar with the case or the drug, but I will draw the hon. Lady’s remarks to the attention of the responsible Health Minister. I also suggest that this is precisely the sort of subject for which an Adjournment debate in the autumn might be suitable.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I, too, join in the congratulations to the Leader of the House and the deputy on their new roles. Earlier this week a critical report from the Care Quality Commission was published branding a care home in my constituency inadequate. This is a continuation of a number of serious and critical reports, some of which have resulted in the closure of care homes. May we have a debate about the criteria CQC operate and whether it has become more rigorous, or whether there has indeed been a decline in the standards in these care homes?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a good case, and I hope he might want to take this subject to the Backbench Business Committee because the questions he raises will concern a large number of constituencies and many Members from all parties.

Philip Boswell ( Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Given the frightening rise in bigoted and racist incidents against EU nationals in the UK, will the Leader of the House call a debate on granting EU nationals living and working in the UK before 23 June the right to remain so we can push this Government to make the right decision and defeat growing racism and bigotry in this country?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has been very clear indeed that our objective is that we should ensure there is indeed a legally binding agreement that people who are here lawfully are able to stay, and equally that British citizens who are lawfully resident in other EU member states should be able to continue living or studying or working there after we leave the EU. These are things that will have to be dealt with, I hope early on, in the forthcoming negotiations.

The physical attacks and the abuse—directed not just at EU nationals, but sometimes at people from other ethnic or religious minorities in this country—bring shame upon this country. All of us have a responsibility to denounce such behaviour and make it clear that it has no place whatsoever in our society, and I have always found that those hon. Members who have, for principled, honourable reasons, taken a stance opposing the UK’s membership of the EU have also been vehement in saying this sort of behaviour has no place in the kind of society they want to see.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): May I also warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend and his deputy on their new appointments?

May I draw my right hon. Friend’s attention to the manifesto commitment, which ought to now be honoured, on the 15-year rule for overseas voters? It is reckoned that 1 million people are disfranchised by this exemption, and it is a particularly sore subject among those living in the EU at the moment who were denied a vote in the referendum.

Mr Lidington: The Government remain committed to new legislation that will lift the 15-year bar, which was introduced by Mr Blair’s Government. It is a complex matter because we would have to not just extend the franchise but establish a new system of voter registration, which is not straightforward given that voter registers no longer exist for periods that go back longer than 15 years. We have to find some way of allocating those individuals to constituencies and verifying a previous place of residence, but my hon. Friends at the Cabinet Office are at work on these matters already.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): In view of what the Leader of the House said earlier, may I remind him that it was a Labour Government who introduced the national minimum wage against strenuous Tory opposition? I remember it well because I voted for the change.
In view of the further situation in Turkey—the state of emergency, the thousands more teachers, academics, judges, journalists who are now being suspended from work, as well as the travel ban and all the other measures, apart from those who have been arrested—may we have a statement today on the situation, bearing in mind that the House will not be meeting again until 5 September? Will the British Government make it clear to the Turkish authorities that what is happening is causing deep concern in this country? It does not seem to be the most effective way of dealing with those who plotted the coup last week.

**Mr Lidington:** I would say to the hon. Gentleman that it was a Conservative Government who introduced the national living wage, and the Conservative-led coalition and the Conservative Government who have taken very large numbers of the lowest paid people in our society out of tax altogether. It was also a Conservative Government who led us to a situation in which there are 2.5 million more people in work than there were when the Labour party left office.

On Turkey, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. None of us would have wished to see a military coup succeed in that country. Equally, the political wellbeing of Turkey will be strengthened if it sticks by the principles of a plural society, multi-party democracy and respect for human rights. Those are principles to which the Turkish Government have committed themselves, not least through Turkey’s membership of the Council of Europe and its participation in the EU accession process. That will be the approach we take in our partnership with Turkey.

**Steven Paterson** (Stirling) (SNP): I am organising a consultation in my constituency on the targeted reduction of VAT for businesses operating in the tourism sector. The policy operates in most parts of the EU, including Ireland, and it is very successful in drawing tourists to those areas to spend their money there. May we have a debate on this matter soon after the recess to discuss ways of helping to boost our tourism businesses?

**Mr Lidington:** The hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity to make those arguments to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and his team at Treasury questions. I understand the case that he is making, but the reality is that a VAT concession in one area means that the money has to be found from some other source of taxation.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): On behalf of the Democratic Unionist party, I also welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new ministerial position and wish him well for the years ahead.

The death of the young soldier Joshua Hoole while on a training exercise in the Brecon Beacons has again raised the issue of the welfare of our soldiers. May I, on behalf of the whole House, convey to his fiancée and family our sincere sympathy? He was a soldier of immense courage, strength and ability, and we sorrow at his death. As the Leader of the House will know, the Defence Select Committee, of which I am a member, has recently made recommendations for training that included the establishment of a defence safety authority, the introduction of a duty holder concept across the armed forces, and the recommendation that the Ministry of Defence should undertake to publicise these measures widely so that families can have confidence that, while military training might be hard and dangerous, the organisers of that training are known and accountable. We recommended that the changes should be put in place by 2017-18. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a ministerial statement on this matter in order to bring forward the timescale for implementation by the MOD?

**Mr Lidington:** I will report the hon. Gentleman’s concerns to the Minister of State for the Armed Forces. The death of that young soldier on 19 July was a tragedy, and the thoughts and sympathies of everyone in the House are with his family, friends and colleagues at what must be an appallingly difficult time for them. A civilian police investigation and a service inquiry into the tragedy are taking place, and it would clearly be wrong for me to speculate on the lessons to be learned until we know the outcome of those reports.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): I recently convened a support and campaign group for the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign in West Lothian and Livingston. One of my constituents said that her divorce settlement was predicated on the age at which she would retire and get her pension, but that has now been moved by several years. Will the right hon. Gentleman, whom I welcome to his place, perhaps have a discussion with his colleague the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about taking a fresh look at the issue in the hope that fresh eyes will not bring the same stale, old ideas but some justice for the WASPI women?

**Mr Lidington:** That is something that the House debated and voted on relatively recently, and I do not in any way want to suggest that there is likely to be a change in policy. Nevertheless, I will report the hon. Lady’s concerns to my right hon. Friend at the Department for Work and Pensions.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I will just gently say that everybody will get in. The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), who is a very, very, very fine man, is the human equivalent of a smouldering volcano as he sits waiting to be called with ever-growing frustration at the fact that he has not yet been called. I simply say that the hon. Gentleman will get in. He has been here long enough to know that it did not always use to be that way and that people did not always get in. Much as I enormously admire the hon. Gentleman, he has—if I may politely say so—a slightly underdeveloped sense of others, and I cannot help but think that if he spoke three times in the day, he would think, “Why on earth didn’t I get called to speak a fourth?” He will get in, but he will just have to be a bit patient. We are saving him—he is a specialist delicacy in the House.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): I, too, welcome the new Leader of the House to his place.

Dr Kate Granger, an inspirational 34-year-old, is in a West Yorkshire hospice dying from terminal cancer. She started the “Hello, my name is...” campaign, a worldwide...
initiative to encourage health professionals to introduce themselves and to treat all patients with dignity. This week she achieved her aim of raising £250,000 for a Yorkshire cancer charity, but her dying wish is to have the new Prime Minister endorse her campaign. Could the Leader of the House use his considerable powers of persuasion to facilitate this amazing lady’s dying wish?

Mr Lidington: The case that the hon. Lady describes strikes me as inspiring, and I immediately want to pass on both sympathy and admiration to the young lady’s family and friends. If the hon. Lady would like to write to me with the details, I will be in touch with the Prime Minister.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I found it positive to hear the Leader of the House condemn the racist incidents that have taken place since the EU referendum. It was unfortunate, however, that the Prime Minister did not take the opportunity on Wednesday to condemn the unforgivably racist language used in the past by the new Foreign Secretary. May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of reflecting carefully on the language that we use in our roles here and the impact that it has on other people?

Mr Lidington: As you regularly remind us, Mr Speaker, we must all bear in mind the impact that the language we choose has outside this building—even if the impact may sometimes be not what we intended. I have been genuinely shocked by the way in which in recent weeks decent, law-abiding people, who have been living here for 20 or 30 years in many cases, have been subjected to abuse or even worse. It is important that all of us, whichever political party we are from and whichever side we supported during the referendum campaign, come together to say that that type of behaviour has no place in our society.

Mr Speaker: I must tell the House that I have just been advised by a distinguished bewigged counsellor to the Chair that alternatives to “smouldering volcano” are “pregnant volcano” and “imminently explosive volcano”. I call Mr Barry Sheerman.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): As a genuine, authentic Back Bencher, may I welcome the Leader of the House to his position? I hope he will be a good force for making sure this is about business questions, rather than about some of the things that go on under the name of business questions. Mr Speaker called him an egghead earlier, and I hope that did not cause offence. Those who worked on the European private Member’s Bill and watched him in action believe he must have had some training in acting and drama, as his gestures and everything he does at the Dispatch Box suggest that that is the case.

I was a smouldering volcano, Mr Speaker, because I wanted to say it is about time we had a major debate in this House on the barriers to people with autism living a full life. I chair the autism commission and we have just produced a fantastic report on the barriers in the health service to autistic people living a full life. Surely an early debate when we get back on that subject would be welcomed, even by the Speaker.

Mr Lidington: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome. I agree with him that, as a House and as a country, this question of giving greater opportunity to people with autistic spectrum disorders is something to which we should turn our attention. I hope this might be a matter that the Backbench Business Committee would see as a priority.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I am more of a slow burner than a smouldering volcano, but I am still very passionate.

I welcome the new Leader of the House to his place. May I ask him for a debate in Government time, or a statement, on the effectiveness of the assessment process, the stability of mandatory reconsideration and the cost to the taxpayer of the tribunal appeals process for personal independence payments, because all of these things are causing great distress to claimants in Neath, in Wales and across the UK?

Mr Lidington: I thank the hon. Lady for her welcome. These are clearly matters that my colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions will wish to consider, and I will draw her remarks to their attention. I think that the quickest way to bring these matters before the House would be for her to raise them during the first DWP questions after we come back.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Last September, the Government announced that they were likely to publish the childhood obesity strategy “in the autumn”. Autumn came and went, as did winter and spring. At an urgent question you granted me kindly in May, Mr Speaker, the public health Minister stood at that Dispatch Box and she intimated to the House that the strategy would be published before the summer recess, giving Members the opportunity to debate thoroughly the contents therein. Where is it?

Mr Lidington: This is undoubtedly an important issue, but one or two other political events in the past few weeks have meant that a number of announcements have been postponed. We have a new public health Minister in place now, who, I am sure, will want to give urgent attention to this point.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I, too, wish to welcome the new Leader of the House to his post. As a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I pay tribute to his wisdom at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which I fear will be much missed in the future. I also pay tribute to Noeleen Delaney, a very long-serving person in this House, for her service and kindness.

There are cat lovers as well as dog lovers here, so I wish to ask this Leader of the House about the cat at No. 10, who looks in a sorry situation, limping with one paw in the air. Is that because he is missing the old Prime Minister? Does the new Prime Minister care for the welfare of cats as much as the old Prime Minister did?

Finally, I want to ask for a statement or a debate as soon as we get back in September on the very serious situation in Turkey, where some of my friends have been arrested in this first round of arrests, and the ongoing humanitarian disaster in Syria. Nearly 100,000 people
are in detention, some of them in very bad conditions, and I ask that the Foreign Office keeps its eye on the ball as far as Syria and Turkey, in particular, are concerned.

Mr Lidington: First, I thank the right hon. Lady for her kind remarks. On the two foreign policy questions she raised, even though the House will be in recess the work of government will go on, and the Foreign Office will be maintaining a close watch on events in both Turkey and Syria. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development will also maintain a key interest not only in the humanitarian disaster to which she alluded, but in making sure that the pledges made by this country and by other countries to put money down to help those in such enormous need in Syria and neighbouring countries are delivered in practice and that the aid gets through to them. I am sure my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will wish to keep the House updated when we return from recess about what is happening in that region.

On the other matters the right hon. Lady mentioned, I can completely reassure her about the Prime Minister’s good intentions towards Larry the cat. I saw some reports in the media that he had been involved in a fracas with the Foreign Office cat. I hope that they have now established a modus vivendi.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I welcome the Leader of the House and his deputy to their posts. Eagle-eyed Members will have noticed some 30 written statements to be made by the Government on today’s Order Paper. A cynic could be forgiven for drawing the conclusion that the Government are trying to bury bad news before the summer recess. Does he wish to dispel this cynicism by giving Members a debate to discuss and consider the contents of these statements on our return?

Mr Lidington: I thank the hon. Lady for her welcome, but she is misconstruing the Government’s intention, which is to put the information before Parliament. She would have had much more cause for grievance had Ministers withheld this information, which instead is being made available. The opportunity is now there for all Members to look at the announcements being made in those written ministerial statements, to come to a considered view about them and then to return to the fray in September ready to question and challenge Ministers on the basis of some time for analysis and reflection.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Another fine ending, Mr Speaker! I confess that when the right hon. Gentleman was Minister for Europe, I used to feel sorry for him, given that he was sent out here like a lamb to the wolves every so often. I still do, because he has left behind the finest salons of Europe to come here every Thursday to fend off requests for debates on Southern bloody rail, which I am fed up with hearing about. None the less, I welcome him to his position.

This week, the Transport Committee heard evidence from Vauxhall about the fact that despite recalling almost 300,000 vehicles, almost 300 have spontaneously burst into flames, putting families and consumers in danger. We have also had the Volkswagen scandal over the past 12 months. May we therefore have a debate on the car industry, so that we can push it to get its act together and stop conning consumers, putting people’s lives at risk and endangering public health, and so that we can urge the Government finally to get their finger out and bring this industry to book?

Mr Lidington: The right sequence of events would be for us to see the report from the Transport Committee, which will doubtless make recommendations to the Government and to other parties, and then to have the benefit of the Committee’s findings and the evidence it has taken when the House comes to debate this subject. As the hon. Gentleman knows, there are opportunities during the parliamentary year for Select Committee reports to be debated, either on the Floor of the House or in Westminster Hall. If there is a strong body of support for this report to be so debated, that seems to be a good opportunity. Finally, I say to him that although I thoroughly enjoyed the time I spent serving in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, it is to this House that I sought election in the first place and I regard having been asked by the Prime Minister to serve as Leader of the House of Commons as an enormous privilege and an enormous opportunity. I have no regrets whatsoever. It is amazing after one is elected to this place on behalf of one’s constituents, but to be asked to serve as Leader of the House is a privilege indeed.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House and all colleagues who took place in those exchanges. I wish colleagues a very enjoyable and stimulating, but restful—we hope—recess.
Backbench Business

Snares

12.23 pm

Jim Dowd (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes the indiscriminate and cruel nature of snares, the failure of previous attempts at voluntary and self-regulation amongst operators, and the continued suffering caused to thousands of animals every year by these traps; and calls on the Government to implement a full ban on the manufacture, sale, possession and use of snares at the earliest opportunity.

First, my thanks go to the Backbench Business Committee for giving me the opportunity to bring this motion to the House. I am keenly aware that, because of the urgent question on school funding, we are running late and that the summer Adjournment debate is generally oversubscribed, so I shall attempt to be brief and hope that we can conclude this matter in a reasonable time. I do not propose to push this matter to a Division, but let me assure the House that if there is a Division I will defend the motion.

Motions arising from Backbench Business debates have a somewhat uncertain pedigree—the status of them is disputed. They are not binding or mandatory. A number of motions have been passed in recent months urging the Government to take action, but the Government have declined so to do. Therefore, I have no illusion that, were this motion to be successful, Government action would swiftly follow; I suspect that it probably will not.

I will attempt to outline as briefly as I can what I believe to be an extremely compelling case for the prospect outlined in the motion. There is widespread support across the House for such a ban. I remember the late Eric Forth who used to be in the Chamber on Fridays meticulously—more so than just about anybody else. Whenever someone said that their Bill had widespread support from Members, he would wave his arms magnificently and say, “Where are they then?”

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Well, where are they then?

Jim Dowd: They knew you were coming! No, that is not true.

I am deeply grateful to the League Against Cruel Sports, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Cat Protection League and other animal welfare organisations that have assisted me in this matter. I also know that there are Members who are ideologically opposed to bans of any kind. Obviously, I do not share that view myself, but we need to exercise caution and judgment. The legal framework in this country under the rule of law is generally about regulating what behaviour is and is not permissible and what should and should not be punished.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): On that point, is not one of the issues with the use of snares now that they simply are not being used for the stated purpose? Often, the species that is targeted is not the species that is captured.

Jim Dowd: I fully agree with my hon. Friend, and I am grateful to him for his point. I hope to go on to elaborate on that in a bit more detail. The thrust of the
motion is about not just the inherent cruelty and barbarism of snares—the single snare that is currently legal—but the gross inefficiency of them. They are not even useful in what they do, and they cause unacceptable consequences.

We have to exercise our responsibility as legislators when we are acting on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves—whether it be children or animals. I believe that there is an imperative here for us to take action. Snares are thin wire nooses set to trap animals seen as a pest or a threat, usually foxes and rabbits. They are intended to catch animals around the neck rather like a lasso. There are two types of snare. The self-locking snare, which is not legal, tightens around the animal the more it struggles. Even when the animal ceases to struggle, the device is still tightened and causes serious injury and death, but, as I said, that is illegal under the current regulations. This motion refers to the free-running snare, which is still currently legal. If it is operating properly, it should tighten as the captured animal struggles, but relax when the animal stops pulling. It is intended to hold the animal live until the snare operator returns to kill it, usually by shooting, or release it if the snare has not caught the right target creature. The disadvantage of a legal free-running snare is that it can in many circumstances act like a self-locking snare, which is illegal, when it becomes kinked or rusty.

Although their purpose is to immobilise target animals, most snares cause extreme suffering to animals and often lead to a painful, lingering death. Animals caught in snares suffer huge stress and can sustain horrific injuries. Snares can cause abdominal, chest, neck, leg and head injuries to animals. Some animals get their legs caught in snares and end up with the wire cutting through to the bone. Such animals may attempt to escape by gnawing off their own limbs. Others are caught around the body.

The number and diversity of animals that fall victim to snares is immense. It is not possible to control which animals will be caught in a snare. A snare set to catch a fox is just as capable of catching other species. Cats, dogs, badgers, otters, deer, hares and livestock have all suffered terrible injuries or been killed by snares.

In 2012 the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs produced an extensive report on snaring in England and Wales, which equates to almost 200 animals caught each and every hour. Moreover, because snares capture any animal that happens to step into them, little more than a quarter of the animals trapped were found in DEFRA’s field studies to be foxes, the intended victims. The other three quarters included hares, 33%; badgers, 26%;—both of which are protected species—and a further 14% described as “other”. That is almost a quarter of a million animals, including deer and domestic pets such as cats and dogs, captured every year. That goes to the heart of the inefficiency of snares as a device for animal control.

DEFRA’s independent working group on snares concluded in 2005 that it would be difficult to reduce non-target catches to less than 40%. According to DEFRA’s 2012 report, 260,000 snares are in use in England and Wales. The report reveals that 95% of landholdings do not use snares, with the use of both fox and rabbit snares being far more likely on landholdings with game bird shooting. I will not go into detail about my attitude towards shooting as a so-called sport. That is an argument for another day, but in common with more than 62% of the population of this country, I am opposed to shooting as a sport and cannot see what possible pleasure can be derived from blasting a living creature to smithereens.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the register. Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the piece of scientific research called “Waders on the Edge”, which shows that the place to see species such as curlew and lapwing, where their numbers are rising rather than falling, is on managed shoots in the uplands?

Jim Dowd: I am aware of many things; I am not aware of the hon. Gentleman’s entry in the register and I am not sure what relevance that has. Perhaps we can have a look later. There are all kinds of conflicting arguments, but the snare and the way it is used is inherently cruel and barbaric. If the price of seeing a curlew or a lapwing is the considerable suffering of tens of thousands of innocent creatures, I do not think that is a price worth paying.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): In all the matters that the hon. Gentleman has just laid out, the key concern for me and for the many constituents who contacted me is the welfare of wildlife. Does he agree that we should put that at the top of our priority list?

Jim Dowd: Exactly. Animal welfare more generally is a widespread concern. I am sure every Member of this House knows that it is one of the subjects on which constituents most regularly contact us.

Richard Benyon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Dowd: I will not for the moment. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will catch the Deputy Speaker’s eye at some stage, and then he will be able to tell us what his entry is.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate through the Backbench Business Committee, and on the compelling case that he is making. Will he accept from me on behalf of the constituents who contacted me that most people are appalled by the barbarity of the practice and the cruelty inherent in it? More power to his elbow for raising this important issue.

Jim Dowd: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his support and that of his constituents.

Snares are currently completely legal in only six European countries—Belgium, France, Ireland, Spain, Latvia and the United Kingdom. In all other countries in the EU they are banned, strictly controlled or are not used at all, so the idea that they are an essential means of animal control clearly is not true. Large numbers of European countries do not use them at all. The predominant legislation in this matter covering all parts of the United Kingdom is the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which prohibits the use of self-locking snares, as I have already mentioned, lays out the requirement to inspect...
the snare once in every 24 hours, and prohibits the use of snares to catch various protected mammals, including otters and badgers.

The code of practice acknowledges the welfare problems associated with snaring. DEFRA introduced a voluntary code on the use of snares in 2005 which was designed to reduce the suffering caused by snares through the adoption of best practice. Gamekeepers have shown themselves to be incapable of complying with DEFRA’s recommended code of practice on the use of snares. In its 2012 report, which I mentioned previously, DEFRA found that although 95% of gamekeepers surveyed were aware of the code of practice and some—38%—had also been trained in the use of fox snares, not a single fox snare operator visited during the study was fully compliant with the code of conduct a full seven years after it had been introduced.

Among farmers there is a lack of knowledge of the code of practice, with a shocking 36% of farmers unaware of its existence. It was clear from the report that, whether people were aware of it or not, the code of practice was not being adhered to. Most snare operators use snares which are not compliant with the code of practice. Some 60% of snare operators had at some time caught non-target animals in fox snares. The majority of snare operators set snares in sites where entanglement was likely. Most rabbit snare operators took no measures to avoid the capture of non-target animals and nearly 30% had caught a domestic cat. Snares must not be used as killing devices. However, according to the DEFRA study, 19% of snare users set snares to kill the target animal. Over 30% of snare operators visited during the study were found to be using snares which were rusty or where the cable was distorted.

The League Against Cruel Sports has always questioned the likelihood that snares would remain smoothly free-running when used in an outdoor environment, and has warned of the potential welfare impacts of rusty wires, which can prevent the snare from slackening off.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, much of this issue is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, but it remains a concern to many of our constituents and has been the subject of many complaints. Since 2013 it has been an offence to set a snare in Scotland unless the operator has successfully completed a snaring training course run by an approved body. Does the hon. Gentleman consider that an appropriate measure to help counter some of the issues that he has identified?

**Jim Dowd**: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for pointing that out. I was going to come on to it later. The devolved Assemblies have made far more progress on the matter in recent years in Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as Scotland. Tightening the code of practice is one route, but after examining the case, my strong feeling is that it is ineffective and impossible to implement. The only humane response is a ban, but I am aware of the progress that has been made in Scotland, in particular.

**Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on obtaining this debate. I have had many letters from constituents who all say the same things. They think this method of killing is obscene. Every 20 seconds an animal is caught in a snare somewhere in the UK. Around 1.7 million wild and domestic animals are killed by snares each year. Snaring is cruel, lethal and a sop to the commercial shooting industry, as we well know; so all power to my hon. Friend’s elbow.

**Jim Dowd**: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for those words and the support of her constituents. The point about snares is that they are not supposed to kill. They are supposed to be a disabling device, if they have worked correctly, to allow the target animal to be humanely disposed of, and if it is not the target animal, as in the majority of cases, to allow it to be released. Snares are not supposed to kill, but in far too many cases they do.

Additionally, during field trials in which fox snares were set in accordance with the code of practice, non-target species were still captured, illustrating that it is impossible to eliminate the risk to non-target animals.

A recent investigation, again by the League Against Cruel Sports—incidentally, I should say in passing that I am delighted to be an honorary life member of the League Against Cruel Sports—has provided further evidence that the code of practice cannot prevent animals from suffering in snares. In February 2015—just last year—investigators captured graphic scenes of foxes and rabbits caught in snares. Despite Government guidelines stating that snares must be used only as restraining rather than killing devices, all the animals filmed were dead when found.

The footage exposed a large death pit—a purposely dug pit filled with the carcasses of livestock and wildlife—designed to lure foxes into snares set along the edge. A dead fox was found hanging from one of the snares, clearly strangled to death. Placing snares alongside a pit or hole violates the Government’s code of practice on the use of snares, yet a snare operator admitted that he caught 50 to 100 foxes this way every year, demonstrating—this is point I was making earlier—that attempts to regulate a clandestine activity that takes place primarily on private land in remote locations is futile, hence my conclusion that we need to introduce a ban.

At a second location, the soaking-wet bodies of several rabbits were discovered in snares. Two of them were trapped in snares set along a fence, in which the rabbits had become heavily entangled during their struggle to escape. The placement of these snares again clearly violated the code of practice. The league has brought forward plenty of other evidence to show that, where the code is not being flagrantly ignored, it is completely and utterly ineffectual.

Most people are opposed to snares. According to a 2014 Ipsos MORI poll, 77% of British people think snares should be banned. According to a Dods poll taken last year, 68% of MPs would support a ban. Veterinary opinion also firmly supports a ban on these cruel and indiscriminate traps. A 2015 poll of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses across the UK found that 87% of respondents believed that snaring is not a humane method of pest control. The figure was even higher—92%—among those who had experience of treating animals that had been snared.

In testimony to the Scottish Parliament—this relates to the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady)—Professor Ranald Munro, a leading veterinary pathologist, stated:
“From the veterinary perspective, snares are primitive indiscriminate traps that are recognised as causing widespread suffering to a range of animals. At their least injurious, snares around the neck can result in abrasion and splitting of the skin. However, being caught in a snare is extremely distressing for any creature and vigorous attempts to escape are natural. These efforts cause the snare wire to kink, thereby changing a free-running snare to a self-locking one. Strangulation and choking follow. It is commonplace for snares to lodge around the chest, abdomen or legs rather than the neck. In such instances the stop restraint is ineffective and the wire cuts through skin and muscle and, eventually, bone. Badgers may be eviscerated when the abdominal wall is cut through. Amputation of the lower limb and foot by a snare is well-documented in deer. These unfortunate animals suffer immensely.”

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con) rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I just help a little? I am sure the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd) is very close to the end, but he is now past the 20 minutes, and I am very bothered that we have a lot of Members and a busy afternoon. If he could wind up shortly, I would be grateful.

Simon Hart: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government and, indeed, his sponsors in this debate—the League Against Cruel Sports—have occasionally used snares for research and tagging purposes. All the descriptions he has just attached to this practice apply when it is used for those purposes, which could be construed as important.

Jim Dowd: I would say, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I thought I had been rather generous with my time, as the expression has it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. What I would say is that you have been very generous—maybe over-generous. The fact is that it is normally 15 minutes for the opening of a debate. I have been very generous and very tolerant—quite rightly, because this is a very important subject—but I do want to get other Members in because we have another debate to follow.

Jim Dowd: Mr Deputy Speaker, I accept your direction implicitly. I shall draw my remarks to a conclusion.

This motion is overwhelmingly supported by animal welfare organisations—not just the League Against Cruel Sports, but Animal Aid, Cats Protection, the RSPCA, the International Fund for Animal Welfare and many others. If a medical product was as ineffective as snares are in achieving their purpose, and if it had the same hideous and detrimental side effects as snares, it would be banned, and I believe that snares should be as well.

I will leave the final word to Mr Chris Packham, a naturalist and well-known TV broadcaster, who said:

“Indiscriminate and inhumane, they should be illegal—there is not much more to say about snares.”

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. There is now a six-minute limit.

12.45 pm

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Mr Deputy Speaker, I am grateful to have caught your eye. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—in case the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd), who introduced this debate, is interested, I am a farmer. I also draw attention to the fact that I am chairman of the all-party group on shooting and conservation, which has an interest in this matter. I respect a lot of what the hon. Gentleman said, but I want to put my remarks into context and disagree with much of what he said.

The use of snares is an important tool in wildlife management, which benefits conservation. I was a little bit disturbed to hear the hon. Gentleman paying so little attention to species, such as curlew and lapwings, that are severely endangered—to the point of extinction in some areas—by fox predation. Therefore, it is necessary to control foxes in such situations if we want these important species to survive and thrive.

There is often no practical and effective replacement for snaring at crucial times of the year. That is particularly the case during summer and spring, because there are heavily leaved areas on trees and that is a time of year when lambs, piglets and other farmed animals are at their most vulnerable, yet at the same time, foxes are having their cubs and therefore become the biggest predators of those farmed animals. Snares are therefore an important part of fox control.

As the hon. Gentleman said, well-designed snares, used properly, are humane and effective in fox control. As he rightly pointed out, it has been illegal throughout the United Kingdom for over 20 years to use self-locking snares. DEFRA-commissioned research in 2012, which he referred to, identified how snaring can be improved through snare design and operating practices.

I want to quote the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust—the GWCT—which is widely respected for its independent research. It says:

“Foxes kill young lambs, piglets reared outdoors, and free range and domestic poultry...Foxes also prey on vulnerable wild ground-nesting birds like black grouse, partridge, lapwing, curlew, and stone curlew, and on brown hare. Several of these are species of conservation concern...There are several methods to control foxes but none of them are effective in all circumstances. One method widely used for foxes is snaring. Snares are particularly effective for foxes in places and at times of the year when rifle shooting is not possible because of dense cover but when fox control may be critical for...”

wildlife prey.

Indeed, the hon. Gentleman’s own colleague, the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), when he was Under-Secretary of State at DEFRA, said:

“The Government consider that, where there is a need for wildlife management, the proper use of snares is one of a range of control methods. Used according to best practice, snares can be an effective and practical means of wildlife management and are needed where other forms of pest control are ineffective or impractical. In these circumstances, snares restrain rather than kill and may prove to be more humane than other methods. If snares were to be banned entirely it...”

may

“encourage the use of more dangerous and illegal alternatives such as poisons.”—[Official Report, 28 November 2006; Vol. 453, c. 495W].
In the time available—I accept your strictures, Mr Deputy Speaker—I will try to rebut one or two of the arguments advanced by the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge. The 2012 DEFRA study set out to estimate the scale of the perceived problems. Inevitably, the resulting figures are an approximation, with considerable uncertainty attached, and I think that is where the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) got her figures from. It is important to realise that some organisations have constructed figures by extrapolating from small samples, which are unlikely to be representative of all the situations in which snares are used, or of current working practices.

For instance, the humaneness assessment in the DEFRA study involved a single operator working in one set of circumstances, while the assessment of the extent of use was made across a random sample of landholdings. If we multiply those figures, we get the sort of figure to which the right hon. Lady referred, which is most unlikely to be true.

Let us look at some of the evidence. An extensive field study involving 429 fox captures showed that, given good practice, less than 1% of snare-caught foxes were injured or killed as a result. Some believe that animals held in snares may seem all right at the time of release but go on to develop life-threatening necrotic conditions—the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge referred to that—but there is no evidence that that commonly occurs. On the contrary, foxes and badgers caught in snares by scientists for radio-tagging have typically not shown any abnormal behaviour or higher mortality. In GWCT studies, some individual foxes have been recaptured in snares, with no apparent ill effect.

How much time have I got?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

12.51 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): May I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd) on making a very strong case in support of the motion? I am usually pleased to follow the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown). He was making an argument, but sadly he ran out of time and we did not get to hear whether his case was as strong as that made by my hon. Friend. It certainly did not appear to be from where I am sitting.

I thank the League Against Cruel Sports, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the National Farmers Union for their briefings for this debate, and I especially thank Nikki Sutherland and Oliver Bennett from the Library for their very useful briefing to Members.

The RSPCA writes:

“In 2005, Defra introduced a Code of Practice on the use of snares. The Code sets out best practice in the use of snares, including guidance on where and how to set snares for different species and possible steps to take to avoid trapping ‘non-target’ species. It should be noted that compliance with the Code is voluntary and a 2012 report produced for Defra found that although awareness of the Code was very high (eg 95% of gamekeepers and 65% of farmers) the levels of compliance with the best practice it contains was very low.”

That was one of the strong arguments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge.

The League Against Cruel Sports writes:

“The League believes that snaring is terribly cruel, indiscriminate and wholly unnecessary and leads to untold suffering and horrific deaths for wild, domestic and farm animals throughout the country…Most snares are used by gamekeepers to protect quarry, which are bred and protected to act as targets for blood sports.”

That is not the same as the farmer argument that we have heard previously.

I apologise to the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), for not welcoming her to her new position when I opened my speech. I did not get a chance to do so during yesterday’s sitting of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, because I was not there for all of her evidence, but I wish her success in her new job. Will she respond to the point made by the League Against Cruel Sports that most snares are set by gamekeepers, not farmers?

The League Against Cruel Sports states that the 2012 DEFRA report on snaring “confirms that it is not possible for snares to be species specific and that non-target animals are still captured, even when the code of conduct is strictly adhered to…It is not possible to regulate the use of snares through a non-statutory code, as adherence to the code is low and there is no incentive for operators to obey it…It is clear that due to the cruel, unnecessary and indiscriminate nature of snares, primary legislation is the only viable option to ban their use.”

Will the Minister comment on that?

Not surprisingly, the NFU—an organisation for which I have high regard—says that “the use of snares for fox and rabbit control is an essential part of wildlife and conservation management,” and that “in certain situations they can be the most humane method of pest control.”

As my hon. Friend has said, however, this issue is not so much about control and then humane destruction, but about animals dying in snares and not being dispatched as humanely as everyone would want them to be.

The Library briefing states:

“Snares are commonly used in the UK to catch certain animals prior to their killing. They can be legally used, subject to certain conditions, to catch animals including foxes, rabbits, rats and grey squirrels.

While snares can restrain animals without causing injury, they have the potential to cause injury and death”, as my hon. Friend has said. The briefing also repeats another point that he made:

“They can also catch non-target animals such as badgers and cats. Their use is therefore controversial.”

To save time, I will not refer to the additional regulations for Wales and Northern Ireland, because my hon. Friend has covered those, but the briefing goes on to note:

“In recent years Scotland has tightened regulations on snares beyond the situation in England and Wales. Snares must have safety stops fitted and users are required by law to now attend a training course and register for a personal identification number. This ID number is required to be displayed on all snares which are set.”

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Snare users in Scotland are required to have approved accreditation and must receive a personal identification number from the police, so snaring without
an ID number is an illegal activity. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that prudent measure should be implemented south of the border?

Jim Fitzpatrick: My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge has also made that case, although obviously we would prefer a complete ban on these things. It has been demonstrated by the devolved Assemblies and the Scottish Government that improvements can be made to the present situation in England and Wales. I am certainly impressed by the fact that each snare has to have an ID number and that, where it can be proven that snares are not being used in the way in which people have been trained to use them, the number can be used to trace the person involved. That is an additional safeguard.

In conclusion, my hon. Friend has made a very strong argument for a complete ban on snares. Even if the Government do not accept that argument, there is also a very strong case, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and I have just agreed, to amend regulations in England. Internationally, we appear to be in a small minority of countries. Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland have all seen fit to move on this issue, and I hope the Government will tell us that they agree with the devolved Assemblies, and that they will improve the situation and move towards, I hope, a full ban. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response in due course.

12.57 pm

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): May I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests?

I want to focus on the farming angle, if I may. It was slightly worrying to hear the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), who is no longer in her place, refer to this as a sop to commercial shoots, and the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd) refer to the distinction between farmers and gamekeepers. The reality is that shooting takes place on farmland: there is no distinction when it comes to gamebirds. The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge has also made that case, and that, if they will improve the situation and move towards, I hope, a full ban. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response in due course.

1.2 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd) on securing this debate, which is long overdue. I can only apologise for the fact that I was not able to hear all of his speech, because I was otherwise occupied. As a former vice-president of the League Against Cruel Sports, I pay tribute to the league’s tireless work to expose the cruelty associated with the use of snares, and to the many constituents who have contacted me to call for a ban. As has been said, 77% of the public support a ban.

Free-running snares—the supposedly humane option—can, as we have heard in graphic and horrific detail, strangle trapped animals or cut through their fur, muscle and bone. Snares are meant to be checked daily, but often they are not, so animals die from exposure, from dehydration, or because they have been rendered defenceless against predators.
The League Against Cruel Sports reports that 69% of animals caught are not the target species. We have heard how hares, badgers and even cats and dogs can be caught in them. I saw pictures yesterday of Scottish wildcats—Britain’s rarest mammal—being killed in snares. It is illegal under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to set a trap or snare intended to injure a protected animal such as a badger, otter or red squirrel. It cannot be right that people can escape prosecution simply by arguing that they lacked the intention to catch those animals, when the likelihood of a protected animal, rather than the intended targets, being caught is so high.

Other countries have managed to ban snares. The UK is one of only five countries in Europe in which snares are completely legal. In countries where snares are not banned outright, such as Spain, the Netherlands and Sweden, their use is much more tightly regulated. We are always hearing from the Government that the UK leads the way in animal welfare, that we have much higher standards than anywhere else and that we are the best in the world. I wish that was true. Iran has just banned wild animals in circuses, for example; we cannot even do that. Although we have much to be proud of, we need to recognise where we are not leading the way, and where we could take lessons from other countries.

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** My hon. Friend just mentioned a ban on wild animals in circuses. At least we won that argument. The Government accepted it, and it was a Conservative manifesto promise in the 2015 general election. We hope that the Government will deliver on it by 2020, but does she agree that the sooner they do so, the better?

**Kerry McCarthy:** As I will come on to say later, the Government have a track record of not acting on such things, even when they have notionally accepted the evidence and said that they will act.

The British Association for Shooting and Conservation, which I have met to discuss a range of issues, disagrees. It states that snares are “an important tool for conservation and food security”.

I accept that farmers have a right to control predators, but that should not mean that we cannot look at whether there are more humane, effective ways of doing so. On conservation, the RSPB accepts there is sometimes a need to control foxes, but it has not found the need to resort to the use of snares on its reserves. Indeed, the RSPB will tell us that fox snares are known to kill capercaillie, the large woodland grouse that is at risk of extinction. Neither the Wildlife Trusts nor the Woodland Trust use snares. Utility companies, local authorities, Network Rail, Natural England, Highways England and the Forestry Commission all manage their land without using snares for pest control.

Despite the best efforts of the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) to convince us that this is just about farming, we know that snares are mostly used on shooting estates. Snares are used to trap natural predators, in their natural habitats, in an often barbaric fashion. The birds are spared death by fox only to be shot by humans, in almost unimaginable numbers, not for food or conservation but for sport—as Chris Packham would say, not sport but slaughter.

We are here to discuss a ban on snares, not wider issues around shooting. However, I want to put on record the fact that, to date, more than 62,000 people have signed Dr Mark Avery’s petition to ban driven grouse shooting, supported by conservation experts such Chris Packham and Bill Oddie. They are concerned about the persecution of hen harriers, the environmental damage caused by heather burning and the increased flood risk caused by grouse moor management, as well as the use of snares. Those are serious, legitimate concerns, which Ministers should be working with conservationists and shooting estates to address, but the Government have so far only given a complacent, dismissive response, which verged on the rude, to the public petition.

There is also the issue of lead ammunition. There are viable alternatives to lead shot but, despite that, the Government have shelved the report of the lead ammunition group, which was submitted more than a year ago. There are concerns about the welfare of the millions of pheasants and partridges reared in cramped cages every year purely for the purpose of shooting. The last Labour Government introduced a code of practice and commissioned a study on cage-based breeding, but the coalition Government withdrew the code and failed to publish the review’s findings.

A similar picture emerges when we look at efforts to address the flaws in the use of snares. As has been said, the previous Labour Government published a code of practice some 11 years ago. Subsequent research for DEFRA was concluded in 2010, but it took the coalition Government two years to publish it and nothing has been done. Some four years after the report came out, the then DEFRA Minister could tell Parliament only that “officials worked with stakeholders to explore options in light of the report’s findings. We are considering options and will make an announcement in due course.”

Last year, the League Against Cruel Sports documented evidence of animals found dead in snares and of pits filled with carcasses to lure foxes into snares that were placed along the edge, in violation of the code of practice. There is a clear need to act, but the Government do not seem willing to do so.

The same thing has happened all too often with animal welfare issues under this Government. We have talked about wild animals in circuses; on that and on many other issues, the Government have been too slow to publish research, failed to commission reviews that would give them the evidence necessary to support the policy, and dismissed expert advice, as we have seen with the badger cull. We can only conclude that neither animal welfare nor evidence-based policy is a priority for the Government; that Ministers are in thrall to vested interests and allowing their own ideological aversion to any form of intervention or regulation to hold sway; and that preventing unnecessary suffering is simply not something they care about.

Given the new Secretary of State’s enthusiasm for repealing the foxhunting ban, I fear that today’s debate may not meet with her approval. The Minister, whom I congratulate on her appointment, supported efforts last year to weaken the hunting ban, which is disappointing.

I hope that on this issue she will prove more receptive. I hope that she does not stand before us today and tell us that the code of practice is working. From all that I have heard today from my hon. Friends, and from all
that I have read and watched in recent days—that has included video evidence of the graphic slaughter of these animals—it seems all too obvious that the voluntary approach and code of practice are not working, and that very little progress has been made. Unless the Minister is very persuasive today, I believe the obvious conclusion is that a ban is necessary.

1.9 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd) on bringing this debate to the House. It is an important debate, and it is time we had it.

A large part of my constituency in Cumbria is rural, and its landscapes and habitats need to be managed. I was born and bred in the country, so I understand and accept that such management includes the management of some wildlife. The hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) went into that in some detail. However, I do not accept that this management has to cause suffering either as a direct result of or as a consequence of the methods used. I urge the Government to look at proper, detailed research on alternative methods that could be used. I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) praise the Welsh Government, and I hope this is the start of a trend for him.

I believe that we have a moral duty to treat animals in a humane and compassionate way. To that end, I have been a member of the Labour Animal Welfare Society for many years, and I am proud of the work that LAWS has done. The previous Labour Government achieved much towards ending the cruel and unnecessary suffering of animals. For example, they introduced the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which for the first time embedded in statute clear standards relating to the welfare of animals and made it a criminal offence to subject any animal, including those caught in snares, to unnecessary suffering.

In 2005, the Labour Government issued guidance—my hon. Friends have mentioned it—including information about how snares should be maintained and set to reduce the pain inflicted. In addition, the guidance detailed the steps that must be taken to reduce the chance that a non-target animal is caught. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) went into the detail of that and demonstrated just how indiscriminate snares can be. As has been said, they are mainly designed to catch foxes and rabbits. However, DEFRA’s own figures, which were cited by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge, are worth repeating: 33% of the animals caught are hares, 26% are badgers and 14% are other animals, including pet cats and dogs.

In 2008, the Labour Government commissioned research on how often snares are used in England and Wales, and on the level of suffering they inflict on the animals they catch. As we have heard, this was published by DEFRA in 2012. The report recommended increasing education for people who use snares, improving the uptake of the code of practice on snaring and encouraging the use of code-compliant snares. The Government could be doing that right now.

The coalition Government said they were considering options for improving welfare standards, but, as we have heard, we have not as yet had any proposals. I was pleased earlier this year when my fellow Cumbrian the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), the then DEFRA Minister, said that the Government were considering options and would soon make an announcement. As we know, however, there has been no announcement. I ask the Minister to look at this urgently so that the concerns raised in the report can be addressed and there can be an announcement as soon as possible after the summer recess.

We have heard about the petition from the League Against Cruel Sports, so we know that there is huge public support for a ban. As the petition has 66,000 signatures, it surely has to be listened to and taken into account when the Government carry out any review of this situation. The League Against Cruel Sports describes snaring as “a cruel, indiscriminate, and wholly unnecessary practice that has no place in modern society.”

I ask the Minister and the Government to work with farmers, gamekeepers and animal welfare groups to develop a coherent and effective package of measures to prevent illegal snaring and the unnecessary suffering of animals. I also ask them to consider working towards a ban.

1.14 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd) for calling this important debate. Despite many parliamentary questions, fierce campaigning from groups such as the League Against Cruel Sports and much work on implementing policy, snares remain a persistent problem.

The situation seems to be becoming a war of attrition. In March 2015, we were told that Ministers were considering options for improving guidance on snares. A date for publication was at that time unknown. This February, the Government were again asked to make it their policy to introduce stricter regulations and a ban on the use of snares. Once again, the answer was that they were considering all options and would make an announcement in due course. How many options are there to consider, and how long is “in due course”?

Much is made of the DEFRA code of practice. It is undoubtedly commendable in its promotion of good practice, but it is not statutory and its enforcement remains by voluntary compliance. The National Anti Snaring Campaign has argued that the code “serves no useful purpose.” In March 2014, the then Government stated that it had no plans to put the code on a statutory basis.

Current legislation prohibits the use of self-locking snares, outlaws the setting of snares in places where there is in increased likelihood of catching non-target animals and requires snares to be checked daily. These requirements are all welcome and I am pleased that there is such a clear framework, but it is quite evident that the law needs to go further. In Scotland, it does go further. In recent years, there has been a tightening of regulation so that snares must be fitted with safety stops, and users are now required to undertake training as well as to register for the personal identification number that needs to be displayed on any set snares.
In 2012, DEFRA published research on “Determining the Extent of Use and Humaneness of Snares in England and Wales”. In February 2016, the Government said: “Following publication of the report, officials worked with stakeholders to explore options in light of the report’s findings. We are considering options and will make an announcement in due course.”

As a result of this research, the Welsh Government have not legislated, but they published “The code of best practice on the use of snares in fox control” in September 2015. This aimed “to deliver higher animal welfare standards, increased efficiency in terms of fox control, and ensure that fewer non-target species are being caught.”

The productive relationship that the Welsh Labour Government have forged with the agriculture sector and its supporting organisations has allowed stakeholders to communicate why a code of practice is so important. This in turn makes enforcement much easier, as users of snares see the benefit of self-policing and of implementing best practice that improves the effectiveness of a snare.

I fully appreciate the divisive nature of this subject. Indeed, I acknowledge the calls from organisations such as the British Association for Conversation and Shooting for a reasoned and reasonable analysis of the activity that is both accurate and measured, and takes account of the need for these tools for conservation and food security. However, I condemn the sometimes barbaric suffering endured by animals, both those that are targeted by the snare and those that are not; quite clearly, it is not the purpose of snares to catch such animals. I appreciate the measured responses from organisations such as the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, the National Farmers Union and the National Gamekeepers Organisation in calling on their members—in Wales, certainly—to adhere to best practice and use snares properly. I call on the Government to make the code of practice statutory and, by doing so, improve efficiency of use, while minimising risk and unnecessary harm. Surely we all agree that we must do all we can to reduce unnecessary suffering and use more humane methods, such as box traps.

1.19 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you for calling me to speak in this debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. I declare an interest as a member of the Countryside Alliance and of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation.

I have a different opinion from my colleagues on the Labour Benches. I agree with them on many things, as they know, but I have a different opinion in this debate. I know that we will still be friends at the end of it no matter what happens, which is important. [Interruption.] Well, I will still be their friend no matter what.

If modern snares are used strictly according to best practice, they surpass international standards for restraining traps. Snares must be checked at least once a day, but best practice recommends twice a day, with the first check at sunrise, or as close to it as is practical, as that is when most catches are made. The Animal Welfare Act makes it an offence for a person to cause unnecessary suffering to an animal under their control. If snares are used correctly, they are humane.

Snares make it possible to control wild predators such as foxes, which have no compunction whatever about what they kill. Some of us in this House will be aware of the fox’s predation. When a fox gets into a hen coop, it does not simply kill one hen; it takes great enjoyment in killing them all, but eats only one. There has to be some control of foxes, and well-designed snares, used properly, are humane and effective.

Legislation is already in place about the use of free-running snares. Modern snares used by responsible people are not a danger or the source of evil and death some would have us believe. I respect the differing views of others in the Chamber, but I ask them to consider the point of view that I am putting forward. To give some examples, a modified foot snare is being used to catch snow leopards as part of research by the World Wide Fund for Nature. That shows that the answer lies not in banning snares, but in ensuring people cannot and do not use them inappropriately. As I have said, they must be used correctly.

Modern snares are greatly different from old styles of snares. Nowadays, a snare is similar to a simple dog lead, but made with a thin wire loop. As well as being free running, modern snares have several design features to improve welfare for the foxes caught and allow the self-release of non-target animals such as badgers, hares and deer.

I am absolutely sure that those seeking change have very good intentions, but we must look at the unintended consequences should their desired outcome prevail. For example, foxes are prolific predators of ground-nesting birds, domestic poultry, game birds, small mammals and young livestock such as lambs. To give an example in the short time I have, the loss of fox snaring, a key method of control, would result in unintended consequences including but not limited to the loss of biodiversity and of income to farmers and other land managers.

The brown hare is a biodiversity priority species. How much pleasure I take in seeing hares in abundance in the fields and across my land back home. That is very much down to fox control, properly carried out by us on the farm and by neighbouring farmers. We need predator control. The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust has shown that predator control explains some 46% of the variation in the hare population. Having predator control is advantageous.

Ground-nesting birds are also affected by fox predation. Across the UK, curlews numbers declined by 42% between 1995 and 2008. Earlier in the debate, some Members referred to snaring that takes place in grounds owned by the National Trust & GWCT, as well as snaring by other landowners and organisations. Curlew and lapwing numbers have increased where there is snaring, as other hon. Members have mentioned.

On hill farms foxes can impact on lamb numbers. Data collected from two Scottish hill farms over four years identified 16 lambs as having been killed by foxes, with a further 53 going missing. Fox predation is a matter of concern for the vast majority of Welsh farmers. Foxes also have the potential to destroy entire free range poultry flocks.

All those examples show that we need a system in place. Free-running snares are the most effective and humane, and conserve mammals on the ground. Without snares, foxes would pose an increased threat to vulnerable
wildlife populations, biodiversity and habitat conservation. They would also cause significantly greater damage to a diverse range of economic activities including shooting, agriculture, forestry and eco-tourism, which all rely on managed countryside. Sometimes shooting foxes is not possible and so the only way to control them is by snaring—land may be inaccessible at certain times of the year, for example, in summer time in particular.

Some Members have referred to the change to legislation in Northern Ireland. This issue concerned the Northern Ireland Assembly during my former life as a Member of that Assembly. The changes intimated here are more than acceptable. I will put the details of the matter on the record. The Northern Ireland Assembly decided to put the relevant order on hold while further consultation was conducted, owing to the strength of feeling there was on this issue. That being the case, although Northern Ireland has made some changes, which I believe are welcome, it has also recognised the great surge of opinion both in favour and against on this issue. We have to have a balance. I therefore have concerns over what is being put forward in the motion today.

1.25 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome the Minister to her place. I look forward to debating important issues such as this with her. I trust we will see a new progressive approach, in particular on animal welfare and other issues within her brief. I hope that today she will be supporting the 77% of people who want us to take action on a ban of the manufacturing, sale, possession and use of snares.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd) for bringing forward this motion and enabling the House to debate the indiscriminate and cruel nature of snares. He is not only an expert on animal welfare in this place but a real champion of it beyond here. He did not make the argument alone; it was echoed across these Benches.

Today, I will set out four key areas: the law, the issues, the research and the alternatives. I will start with the law. In 1981 the Wildlife and Countryside Act prohibited self-locking snares, specifying that snares must be free running. But there has been no definition in statute or in the courts of what self-locking actually means. We have heard today of the challenge caused by the fact that free-running snares turn into locking ones as a result of wires becoming twisted or rusted.

The Act also requires that snares should not be set to catch non-target animals, yet only 25% of animals caught in snares are target animals, meaning that 75% are not. Clearly, it is not possible to uphold legislation on that in practice. It also says that snares should be inspected daily, yet we know that only 77% are, meaning that 23% are not. There is clearly poor policing and poor practice on that. Basically, the law is not working.

Countries have recognised that. My hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) talked about the Welsh Government’s “Code of best practice on the use of snares in fox control”, published in 2015. The Northern Ireland Government brought forward the Snares Order (Northern Ireland) 2015, which requires snares to have stops and swivels and to be staked in the ground. We also heard from the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) about the progress Scotland has made on the issue, by looking at training and registration, as well as the provision of personal ID numbers to ensure better regulation of snares. In 2005, Labour brought forward a code of practice to upgrade the 1981 Act, stating that snares should pose no risk to other animals. Labour then commissioned a research report, “Determining the extent of use and humaneness of snares in England and Wales”, which we have heard came out in 2012.

There are five nations where snares remain legal: the UK, Ireland, Latvia, France and Belgium. Today we can take a step forward and join progressive nations in outlawing snares and recognising their real cruelty. We should also recognise the fragmentary nature of legislation on snares; the voluntary code is not working and the legislation is not being properly enforced.

Moving on to the issues, as we heard so clearly from my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), snares are mainly used in relation to blood sports and the protection of game birds. We have heard that 95% of large landowners do not use snares. We have also heard that snares capture, maim and kill 1.7 million animals every year. During the course of this debate today, over 200 animals will have been snared.

We know that snares deteriorate over time—a point made powerfully today by hon. Members—with 30% becoming rusty or getting stuck. They are then no longer free-running, but dysfunctional and the cause of additional animal cruelty. We have also heard that catches are indiscriminate because snares do not identify the animal about to put its head, body or part of its body through the noose. Only 25% of snared animals are foxes; 33% are hares; 26% are badgers, and 14% are deer, otters and domestic animals such as cats and dogs.

It is a criminal offence to harm domestic pets, but they also fall foul of snares. So do humans—fell runners and ramblers get caught up in and injured by snares. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) about the lack of intent, but that is no defence. The evidence is before us today.

We have heard from so many hon. Members on these Benches about the extensive cruelty. As my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) said, it is barbaric how snares cause such harm and cruelty, with animals suffering for hours as they are trapped. If we claim to be a progressive country, we must have progressive legislation and bring in a ban. Today would not be soon enough. That view is supported by 87% of vets. As we have heard, 95% of landowners do not use snares and nor do 250 municipal authorities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East set out, the RSPB, Network Rail and many other authorities no longer use snares. The reason is that they are indiscriminate, inhumane and the law covering them is not applied properly. It does not work and it does not address the issue. That is borne out by the research, as my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) highlighted.

It is important to look at the behaviour of foxes. They are very competitive and territorial, so if space is vacated because a fox has been killed, other foxes will
move into that area and breeding will increase to fill the space. That has been proven over 40 years, with our fox community remaining consistent at 250,000 adults. The hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) mentioned a response from my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) about wildlife management. We recognise the importance of that issue, but that response was before the DEFRA report in 2012, which moved forward on the evidence. It is important that we look at the most up-to-date evidence, rather than looking back to parliamentary questions asked before that report.

The report talks about the need for increased powers in the code, because it is not working. We need to move the whole framework forward and to recognise that inspections are not working. The report goes on to say that inspections should happen not once, but twice a day. If that is part of the voluntary code, my question is how that would be implemented. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said that once a day was enough, but it is not and we need to go further. We know that 36% of farmers are unaware of the contents of the code—or even of its existence—and only 3% have had any training on snares. Clearly the code is failing. It is failing animals and wildlife, and we need to get real about that. We also know that even stops on snares do not prevent animal cruelty, as so much evidence has now come forward on that point.

We need to move forward on the principles of how we uphold our wildlife, our animals and their welfare, to ensure that they have freedom from hunger, thirst, pain, injury and disease, freedom from discomfort and to express normal behaviours, and freedom from fear and distress. The psychological impact is also important.

What are the options for the future? More training and licences would follow the Scotland model, but we have heard that the take-up of training is low, so that in itself is not enough. Training manufacturers is also recommended, but the problem with that is as soon as snares leave the factory, they get old, rusty and out of date, and therefore do not work. Stops and swivels work to an extent, but injury is still caused to wild animals. The report recommends research on the design of snares. That is one option—research is always good and progressive to an extent, but injury is still caused to wild animals.

I thank the hon. Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), for Workington (Sue Hayman), for Neath (Christina Rees) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friends the Members for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) for their contributions, as well as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell)—it is a pleasure to debate with her today.

I fully understand the passion that hon. Members have—as do our constituents—in wanting a high regard for animal welfare. As the hon. Member for Workington pointed out, it is accepted that wildlife needs to be controlled. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) and the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out, culling of certain prolific species actually assists the conservation of endangered species. I reassure hon. Members that the Government share the public’s high regard for animal welfare and we are proud to have the highest animal welfare standards in the world. We also recognise that the welfare of our wild animals can be protected even further and more can be done to improve snaring practices.

Snaring is just one part of a range of measures that have to be used to manage some species, the control of which underpins agricultural production, farm animal husbandry, the sustainable harvesting of wild game birds and the conservation of wildlife. At crucial times of the year, especially spring and summer, vegetative cover often makes other measures impractical, leaving snaring as the only effective form of management. When practised to a high standard and in adherence to the law, snaring can provide land and wildlife managers with an effective means of restraining target animals before they are humanely managed. There is no question,
however, but that if used incorrectly snares are capable of causing injuries and suffering to the animals for which they were set and, through accidental capture, to non-target species for which snaring is entirely inappropriate.

Kerry McCarthy: The Minister says—I have heard this many times from Ministers—that the UK has the best animal welfare standards in the world. I gave some instances in my speech where I do not believe that we do, so where is the evidence? Will she publish something that shows why she is so confident that we have the best animal welfare standards in the world?

Dr Coffey: Off the top of my head, I cannot quite remember the exact phrase, but there is something like an international index. The UK, alongside, I believe, countries such as Austria and Switzerland, is reckoned to be in the top five. I also believe that that is an independent assessment. I will let the hon. Lady know what I am referring to in the usual way, if she is agreeable to that.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I congratulate my hon. Friend—I am sorry I failed to do so in my speech—on her new elevation. We are very pleased to see her in her current position. Does she agree that nobody wants unnecessary suffering from snaring or anything else? Will she therefore agree to provide a new updated code, so that best practice can be followed?

Dr Coffey: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. I would just ask him to be patient and wait a few minutes.

Returning to the recognition that snares are capable of causing injuries, the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 prohibited the use of inhumane self-locking snares. I recognise what the hon. Member for York Central said: that they are accepted to be in law mechanisms that tighten and cause asphyxiation. The 1981 Act requires trappers to check their snares at least once every 24 hours. Hon. Members will also be aware that the Act prohibited the use of snares to take certain species, including badgers, otters, red squirrels and hedgehogs. The Deer Act 1991 offers similar protection to any deer. Under the Animal Welfare 2006 Act, there is a legal responsibility to prevent unnecessary suffering to any animals under human control, including any animal restrained in a snare.

The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge refers to the inefficiency of snaring, but I am not aware that he has suggested other methods that would be more efficient in wildlife management. I recognise that the hon. Member for York Central referred to several alternatives, including chemicals. As yet, I am not aware that they are shown to be more efficient or effective. My hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) referred to efficiency. I think that is borne out, although I recognise some of the issues addressed.

The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge and other Members referred extensively to the 2005 code of practice issued by DEFRA, and to the 2012 study. He mentioned a number of issues he would like to see addressed. That is a view shared by many people. Land management organisations and gamekeeping associations around the country have developed a new code of best practice on the use of snares for fox control in England, which would also be suitable for the control of rabbits. Designed and written by a number of stakeholders, including the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, the Moorland Association and the Countryside Alliance, of which I note the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is a member, this new guidance builds on the previous DEFRA code of practice, but draws on reliable research conducted by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust by setting out principles for the legal and humane use of snares.

The capture of non-target species can be reduced by appropriate setting, taking into account the behaviour of the target animal. The new code of practice emphasises this very clearly, stating that if non-targets are likely to be caught, snaring should not be used. Improvements in snare design mean that it is far more likely that non-target species, even if caught, can be released unharmed.

My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds talked about well-designed snares and started to explain, before he was cut off in his prime, how best practice can tackle a lot of these issues—a point reinforced by the hon. Member for Strangford. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse drew attention to the fact that snares are mainly used by gamekeepers, rather than farmers. I would point out that snares are used by different groups, including gamekeepers and farmers. These different groups operate in very different environments and have different pressures. Snares are often the most appropriate mechanism for gamekeepers. Upland areas have a different habitat and environment, with more unrestricted areas than farmland.

There have been many references to practices in Scotland and the Welsh code, which the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) said should be made statutory. I think we should give the new code of practice, which I understand is very similar to the Welsh code, a chance to come into effect before even considering any further regulation.

If people do not believe the law is being enforced they should report such incidents to the police. Many forces have rural and wildlife crime units. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse said that the wild animals in circuses prohibition will be delivered in this Parliament. I point out gently to the hon. Member for Bristol East that the Labour Government were in power for 13 years and the Ministers of the day were not persuaded to legislate on a ban.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I would not want the Minister to inadvertently mislead the House. After the Animal Welfare Act 2006 was passed, proposed legislation on circus animals was left to one side. Between 2007 and 2009, the Labour Government were persuaded of the case and the 2010 Labour party manifesto committed to legislating on wild animals in circuses. The lobby was successful, but she is correct that at that point we did not have time to legislate.

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman is right. I am not questioning what was in his manifesto, but his party was not re-elected in 2010. I was referring to the practice of snares, rather than wild animals in circuses.
I am confident that the new code will improve the situation. It is different from the 2005 code, in that the new code has been designed and owned by the sector, rather than Government—although we have, of course, brought people to this place and had conversations. By showing leadership in this area, the sector will undoubtedly have more success in promoting good practice with their members and changing behaviour than the Government could achieve on their own. I cannot announce today exactly when the code will be published, but I am confident it will be very soon. I am on day four in this role as a Minister. I am really looking forward to the code’s being published and put into practice.

We have had an excellent debate. It is crucial that we all take responsibility and continue to work together to ensure that best practice is recognised, shared and followed by everyone who uses snares. We support measures that improve animal welfare, including the new code of practice. We are all looking forward to its being published very soon.

1.47 pm

Jim Dowd: I have listened to what the Minister said. Unfortunately, I am not assuaged by it because, to coin a phrase, I have heard it before—now it will be “very soon”. It took the Government two years to publish the DEFRA research and development unit report. It began in 2010 and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) pointed out, took until 2012 to produce it.

I apologise for my appalling bad manners in not welcoming the Minister to her new position. I hope she makes a success of it and enjoys her new responsibilities.

The one unifying factor across the House is that everybody accepts the need for animal pest control and decent standards of animal welfare. Nobody disputes that. The question is always one of means, not ends. If the means deployed involve exceptional cruelty and barbarity, that is not a price worth paying. The Minister mentions there being no alternatives. There are plenty of alternatives—unfortunately, Mr Deputy Speaker stopped me from getting on with my speech—including adequate poultry housing, fencing, scare devices and shooting.

I was delighted to hear what the Minister said about wild animals in circuses. Members may recall that that started as a resolution from this Chamber in a Backbench Business debate. I hope that that is an omen and a precedent. I hope the House will adopt the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the indiscriminate and cruel nature of snares, the failure of previous attempts at voluntary and self-regulation amongst operators, and the continued suffering caused to thousands of animals every year by these traps; and calls on the Government to implement a full ban on the manufacture, sale, possession and use of snares at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This morning, the Government sneaked out, alongside 29 other written statements, confirmation of a major increase—2.8% in 2017-18—in tuition fees. Two days ago in the House, when we debated the Higher Education and Research Bill, Ministers made no reference to this. Is it not disgraceful that they should use this cynical last-day-of-term mechanism? Have you had any indication that a Minister is available to answer questions from colleagues before we disappear for five and a half weeks?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I should point out that we are coming to the pre-recess Adjournment debate. If he would like to mention that in the debate, he is more than welcome to do so, and I am sure that the Treasury Bench will take it to the relevant Minister. If he would like me to add him to the list or if he wishes to catch my eye, I will see what I can do.
Summer Adjournment

1.50 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

The hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) sends his apologies; the time taken by the urgent question meant that he could not stay but had to leave to attend to constituency business.

I wish to concentrate my remarks on some local issues and matters concerning this House that might benefit from a mention. I am pleased to report that during the recent London mayor mayoral election in Harrow East, we managed to secure an overwhelming majority for our mayoral candidate, our constituency candidate and the party vote. Regrettably, the rest of London did not follow the same line. I am also pleased to say that we secured a strong majority vote in my constituency to leave the EU, which was of course echoed across the country.

On transport, the dreadful performance of Southern Rail was mentioned in business questions this morning. This affects my constituents as well. The service from Harrow and Wealdstone station to Gatwick airport and Brighton has already been cut, and now Southern proposes to cut the service to Croydon. I wrote to the outgoing Rail Minister about this, and I trust that there will be strong action from the new Secretary of State and the Rail Minister to combat this disgraceful service.

Flooding is a particular issue in my constituency. Many Members from rural constituencies might not realise this, but constituencies like mine have seen deep pools of water and sewage emerging as a result of recent flash floods and heavy rainfall. I have had consequential correspondence and held a series of meetings with the council, Thames Water and the Environment Agency, and it is a great source of frustration that none of them is taking any action to remedy the problem. As a result, many homes have been flooded unnecessarily, which has caused immense problems with insurance.

I had hoped to report today a satisfactory outcome to the ongoing saga of the redevelopment of the Royal National Orthopaedic hospital. This has been going on since before I was elected: my predecessor and his predecessor attempted to get the hospital rebuilt. The only thing that seems to have changed is that the NHS Trust Development Authority has changed its name to NHS Improvement. Still the bureaucracy continues and still the £20 million funding that is required is being “considered carefully” by the bureaucrats. I trust that the Health Secretary and his team will reduce these levels of bureaucracy and that we can get a reasonable and quick decision on a proper, business-like service. This is a service on which we all rely.

I am receiving complaints about the planning service in Harrow. The local authority is struggling to deal with enforcement notices and the grey areas around permitted development and retrospective planning approval. I warned about this when the Government changed the rules and regulations on planning. It is now causing immense problems, not only in my constituency but throughout London.

I have also received numerous complaints about the rejection of legitimate visa applications submitted for weddings, religious ceremonies, education and other visits to this country. My office is referring every case either to UK Visas and Immigration or the Immigration Minister. We are seeing mass rejections of visas for families travelling to my constituency for legitimate reasons. This needs to be rectified.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. At their advice surgeries, many MPs see people complaining about legitimate entry clearance applications being refused. At the same time, is the hon. Gentleman aware that the high commission in Islamabad recently granted entry clearance to two hate preachers, including one Muhammad Qureshi? Why does he think that permission is being granted to people who are seriously dangerous to our country yet not to those who are not?

Bob Blackman: It is quite clear that the problems in the visa system need to be resolved. People who want to cause harm and damage to good community relations in this country should be barred from entering. The new Immigration Minister has a task to review this process. I have proposed that visitors from India have the option of a two-year visitor visa, just as visitors from China do. It might be possible to consider other countries as well, but if we have friendly relations with countries, we should allow people from there to come and visit on a reasonable basis. We should also bar those we do not want here, and that includes barring from our mosques messages from hate preachers who preach over the internet or via satellite television. That causes religious and other concerns.

I wish to take up the vexed issue of the garden tax in Harrow. The council decided in 2015 to charge for the collection of garden waste. Having contacted every London borough, we have established that Harrow is charging more than any other borough in London, and probably the country, for garden waste collection. Residents were rightly outraged by this imposition, but the policy has been approved and 10,000 addresses in my constituency have now been registered for this tax. We have had 168 complaints of poor service and 3,080 missed collections out of 128,000 since the service was introduced. The service is poor yet the most expensive in the country. It is outrageous.

I was pleased recently to visit Bentley Priory museum, where we were buzzed by a Spitfire as part of the celebrations of our winning the Battle of Britain. I also received an interesting request. After successfully securing from the Chancellor a £1 million grant towards an education centre for the museum, I received an email asking for an invoice for £1 million and details of the person to whom the cheque should be payable. I had to check that it was not coming from Nigeria or some other country, rather than a civil servant. I am pleased to say that I was able to pass it on to the relevant people and to make sure they got the money they deserved.

I am pleased to say that the first state-sponsored Hindu Secondary School in this country has now received planning permission. It will be built in my constituency and will open as soon as possible. I look forward to the new Secretary of State for Education coming to open it in due course.

After the break, I will be introducing a private Member’s Bill on homelessness reduction. It is supported by national charities such as Crisis, Shelter and St Mungo’s and by
against the continued attacks on Hindu minorities in Bangladesh, we should spend more of our development aid to Bangladesh, and I am proud of the fact that money has actually been spent. The area illegally occupied by Pakistan must be repatriated to India. I have spoken on a regular basis to ensure that we get some action. I thus strongly recommend it for all Members. I start my day with a short period of yoga exercises and stretches and meditation, and it has served me extremely well. I thus strongly recommend it for all colleagues—[Interruption.] No, I will not demonstrate it here and now! I have held two meetings with the Minister of AyUsh—Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy—in India. The aim was to get Indian Ministers to inform the Government here and all who would like to listen that this can be utilised to assist people’s wellbeing, as well as ensuring that people can relax and live a proper, decent and long life.

This morning I also raised the plight of religious minorities in Bangladesh. I would like to highlight early-day motion 351 for Members to sign if they so wish, with the aim of ensuring that we get some action. At the moment, we spend £157 million on overseas development aid to Bangladesh, and I am proud of the fact that this country spends 0.7% of its gross domestic product on overseas development. It seems to me that at a time when religious minorities are being victimised and persecuted in Bangladesh, we should spend more of that money on improving security over there for all people of all religions rather than on some of the areas where the money has actually been spent.

I have also raised the plight of Hindus in Jammu and Kashmir. This is an integral part of India, and it shall remain so. The area illegally occupied by Pakistan must be repatriated to India. I have spoken on a regular basis against the continued attacks on Hindu minorities in Kashmir. As a result of the assassination of the terrorist Burhan Wani, the situation in the valley has erupted, with Pandits and Government establishments attacked by Kashmiri Muslims and other terrorists.

I visited Jammu and Kashmir to gain a first-hand understanding of the situation. I met many members of civil society, politicians, lawyers, traders and residents to understand the situation in both Jammu and Kashmir. I met senior cabinet Ministers in Delhi, and it is quite clear that there are huge opportunities for tourism and infrastructure improvements and for the whole of society to come together, provided that the terrorism ceases.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for telling us about his experiences in Jammu and Kashmir. I have been there, too, and I would like to say that the terrorism runs both ways. It is important for us to acknowledge that. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there is a long way to go, and that there are opportunities to be had for creating greater community cohesion. It is important to register the fact that the acts of terrorism, as I say, go both ways. I have seen that at first hand myself.

Bob Blackman: The reality is that under UN resolutions, Pakistan is illegally occupying part of Kashmir, and it should leave. I am also concerned about the link-up between China and Pakistan on the illegal silk route that is being followed, and the threats to security that result from it.

Let me deal now with the costs to the NHS that come from smoking. At the moment, treatments for people who choose to smoke amount to £2 billion a year, while smoking causes 79,700 unnecessary deaths every year. Smoking rates still remain stubbornly high, but I am delighted that the numbers of young people taking up smoking are dropping considerably, which is good news for the longer term. I shall be hosting a round table event in September to discuss progress on the tobacco control plan, and I urge the new Health Minister to ensure that this control plan is introduced as quickly as possible. Our meeting will bring together key stakeholders interested in the development of the plan, and is intended to ensure that we give appropriate recommendations to the Department of Health on this issue. This has been delayed over the summer, and the change of Ministers might bring a need for further consideration, but I urge the Department to get on with this quickly.

In conclusion, I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all members of staff, who serve us so well, a very happy recess. Personally, I shall be working in my constituency on behalf of my constituents, as well as having a very short and brief holiday to allow me to recover from this year.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. There will be a seven-minute limit on Back-Bench contributions.

2.7 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise a number of important issues on behalf of my constituents. Next Wednesday, I shall join residents of the Horn Park estate in my constituency to lobby the clinical commissioning group to urge it not
to take the decision to cease funding of The Source, which is a nurse practitioner-led health centre on the estate. We do not want to lose any form of health service provided locally. The estate has no pharmacy and no GP practice. In fact, the nearest GP practices are almost two miles away.

One of the reasons given for taking this service away is that many of the patients treated by The Source, which is funded by Greenwich CCG, are patients of Lewisham doctors. I campaigned against the closure of the GP practice on this estate 25 years ago, when it first lost its practice. As part of the single regeneration budget 5 funding, in 2007 facilities for the introduction of a nurse practitioner-led service were funded, but now, because public health has been separated off from the previous primary care trust, the service falls between two stools. Local GP practices refer people to this service, and they appreciate the quality of it. No one disputes the fact that it provides good value for money, but because of this split in the funding between public health and primary services funded by the CCG, no one is prepared to continue funding it.

Last year, this service treated 5,332 patients, and 4,489 in the previous year. The annual cost is about £142,000, which is minuscule in the scheme of things. The average cost per visit is about £26.63. This is really good value for money. Everyone recognises that it is really good value for money, and everyone recognises that this is a deprived community which needs direct access to health services, but because of the bureaucracy, people are being penalised. Although all those people are Greenwich residents, some of them were forced to join Lewisham practices because the estate was on the border, and now they are being penalised. Having lost their own general practice years ago, they are now being told, “We are not prepared to fund this service”, because a fifth of the people who use it are Lewisham patients although they are Greenwich residents.

That is completely unacceptable, and I will be there with my constituents lobbying very hard for all the health managers—general practices, the CCG and the local authority—to come together and maintain the service on the estate for my local residents. It provides vaccinations and treats people who need dressings renewed, so that they need not undertake arduous journeys to other places. It has been said that many of those services will be replaced by home visits, but at a cost of £26.63 per visit to the centre, it cannot be cost-effective to travel all the way to the far end of the borough to treat people in their own homes when those people are asking for the service to be maintained because they use it for many purposes. I hope that a health Minister will hear my appeal and intervene, bang some heads together, and ensure that we do not lose that vital service on the estate.

Another issue that I want to raise is the quality of service that is being provided by Southeastern. It is utterly appalling. We have had some truly hot weather this week, for the first time this summer, and what has it resulted in? A minor change in the weather for a short time has resulted in major disruption to the service. It seems that no matter what sort of weather we have—whether it is heavy rain, severe cold, a bit of snow, or some hot weather—Southeastern cannot run the trains.

We in south-east London do not have direct access to the London underground, and we rely heavily on those rail services to travel to and from central London.

According to a recent survey conducted by Passenger Focus, passenger satisfaction is going down sharply. In autumn 2012, 83% of passengers were satisfied with the service, and punctuality stood at 91.4%; in spring this year, the satisfaction rate was down to 70%, and punctuality stood at 87%. That is just not good enough. According to a Passenger Focus survey of Southeastern passengers, only 53% were satisfied with its services. It was one of the worst performers.

One problem that confronts my constituents is overcrowding. Our platforms have been lengthened to accommodate 12-car trains, but we have yet to see those trains. We know that rolling stock will become available when the Thameslink upgrade has been completed, and that existing rolling stock will be available to Southeastern if the Government give their approval. Let me appeal to the Government again. We have lengthened the platforms, and we have told people that they will have longer trains. We have no underground, we rely heavily on those train services, and we must have that additional rolling stock to improve the quality of the service.

I have only a few moments left, but I want to raise one more issue. I have written to the Minister about a planning application for the site at the Gaelic Athletic Association. The planning inspector has recommended approval, but I urge the Minister not to set such a precedent. There is a viable plan for that sports ground, and we should not be building on it.

2.14 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate and to have an opportunity to welcome my colleagues on the Front Bench, who are serving—I think for the first time—as Deputy Leader of the House and duty Whip. I congratulate them on their new responsibilities.

In a summer when a decade seems to have passed in the last month—indeed, so much has happened since the ghastly murder of Jo Cox that it seems a long while ago, although in reality it was a very recent tragedy—and at a time when Brexit and the how, when and in what way we leave the European Union seem to be the dominant theme of so much media focus, I want to concentrate on issues over which we have always had complete control in this country. At this time, the emphasis is on the need for us—Government, Members of Parliament, local government and other agencies—to come up with answers and deliver them, so that life in our country and our constituencies, in my case the ancient city of Gloucester, gets better from year to year.

Let me begin with transport, because that is how we Gloucester residents travel to and from our city, how visitors arrive, and how our investors gain their first impressions. Two improvements could be made at Gloucester railway station—indeed, so much has happened. Two improvements could be made at Gloucester railway station—in the frequency of the trains and in the infrastructure. It still seems extraordinary to me that Arriva CrossCountry’s inter-city service between Birmingham and Bristol, which runs 63 trains a day, stops only three times at the city of Gloucester.

My hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry) worked on that problem diligently when she was the trains Minister. I hope that the new Minister will pursue
with the same enthusiasm the business of enabling more CrossCountry trains to stop at Gloucester as the Department for Transport completes its programme for a new franchise in the west of England.

As for the infrastructure, Great Western Railway is making good progress with a new station car park, which will open up the southern side of the station for the first time in its 150-odd years of existence. However, there is more work to be done. I hope that the new Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will look favourably on the bid from the Gloucestershire local enterprise partnership, which includes a significant amount of money for a general station infrastructure project that will undoubtedly be one of the drivers of growth in our city in the future.

Of course, it is also important for our bus, road and cycle infrastructure to be in as good a state as possible. Our new bus station is well under way, and I know that the city and county councils will ensure that it is delivered on time and within budget, but the road situation is more complicated. The so-called missing link on the A417 between the M4 and the M5 is a major blockage to growth, not just in Gloucestershire and in the city of Gloucester but more widely, but between the south and the north of the country, I hope that my right hon. Friend the new Secretary of State for Transport will take the same interest as his predecessor in ensuring that the first spade goes into the ground for that important new project before April 2020.

As a keen cyclist—only marginally put off by a promising black eye, which those with keener vision will spot, resulting from an incident this morning—I hope very much that the county council’s £3.5 million project for a new cycle lane between Gloucester and Cheltenham will receive approval from Highways England in due course. I am also separately pursuing longer-term improvements on the towpath between the city centre and Quedgeley. I can tell colleagues who have never had a chance to visit Gloucester that that is a wonderful cycle journey. They would be excused for not realising at any stage, even before visiting the Pilot Inn at the end of their journey, that they were cycling in the middle of a city rather than in a particularly glorious bit of the English countryside, because that is, in fact, what they would be doing.

Finally, I want to refer to two education projects which, in the longer term, will make a huge difference.

First, there is the bid that we are preparing for a new Gloucestershire health university technical college, which will serve the people of our county and, possibly, people from wider afield who could travel by train from Swindon or even from Worcester. It will give 14 to 18-year-olds a chance to visit Gloucester that that is a wonderful cycle journey.

Second, there is a bid that we are preparing for a new franchise in the west of England.

The other education bid we are making is for a new RAISE academy, which will be for excluded pupils from our secondary schools. This is also important. Everybody deserves a second chance and the opportunity to get back into learning and get the qualifications and skills they need to get good jobs later on, and I hope very much the Department for Education will look favourably at that.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I note what my hon. Friend says about the great training going on. Does he agree that with over 300 different careers in the NHS, that new training establishment for excluded pupils might do well to see if there is a place for each one of them in our great NHS?

Richard Graham: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right to stress that. She has experience of the NHS herself as a doctor, and it is right to point out that there are huge opportunities both on the technical level and the care side and on the course she took through university.

I should finish my contribution today by drawing attention to two exciting things happening in Gloucester during this great summer period. The first is our summer of music, art and culture, which is already well under way. The world’s longest running and I think longest festival of all, the Three Choirs festival of Gloucester, Hereford and Worcester, starts on Saturday. There will be spectacular concerts for the next couple of weeks around that. We will then come to the Gloucester history festival, which I created with many other friends and partners some six years ago, and this year is looking to be even bigger and better than usual. That will be in the first two weeks of September, immediately after Gloucester day, when we celebrate the moment when the city of Gloucester refused to open its gates and surrender to King Charles I, thereby preventing the King from succeeding in his mission in the civil war and ensuring the supremacy of Parliament, which I am sure we all celebrate, as I wish all colleagues a very happy summer recess.

2.22 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): The vote to leave the EU a few weeks ago is a great indication that there are millions of people in our country who feel that they are being left behind, not sharing in the growing prosperity of others. And they are right.

Unemployment may be down according to certain definitions, but poverty certainly is not. For one of the first times in UK history, low wages mean most of Britain’s poor families are in working households. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has found that two thirds of children living in absolute poverty have at least one parent in work.

Even the introduction of the new national living wage, intended in the words of the former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), to give Britain “a pay rise”, has fallen short. It has become a black eye, which those with keener vision will spot, resulting from an incident this morning—I hope very much that the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will look favourably at that.

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off as a result. In these new contract terms, the employee’s basic per-hour pay was going to increase, but his overall pay would be reduced by £2,600 per year. This is because B&Q planned to cut Sunday and bank holiday pay, as well as other discretionary bonuses—in short, everything that made B&Q an attractive employer and allowed it to retain its staff.

I was delighted that my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) was able to speak in my place during the debate on the national living wage in this House back in April, where dozens of Members voiced their concerns regarding B&Q’s plans. I was pleased that after the press attention in the debate, a great deal of lobbying, and a meeting between me and the B&Q CEO, the company extended its period of compensation for employees for two years, promising that no one would lose out for the next 24 months. But B&Q is just one of many.

Over the course of my campaign, I have been approached by employees from around the country, and from all sorts of different companies doing exactly the same thing. There were the factory employees working for subsidiaries of Samworth Brothers in Lincolnshire who are facing cuts to their overnight pay. I was delighted that my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield South East (Clive Lewis) and for Luton South (Gareth Snell) met with Samworth workers to hear their concerns. There were young baristas at Caffè Nero and EAT whose free lunches had been scrapped. Most recently, there are 7,000 staff at Marks & Spencer who will be losing out by thousands of pounds each year because the company is cutting overall pay to fund an increase in basic pay.

I have had well over 100 M&S employees from around the country coming forward to me with M&S’s new proposals, with staff terrified for their futures. M&S is cutting Sunday and bank holiday pay, redefining unsocial hours and scrapping its pension scheme, leaving staff with over 20 years of experience at M&S significantly worse off.

Let us consider Elizabeth, whose story was reported yesterday in the Evening Standard. Her name has been changed to protect her identity. Elizabeth used to have great wages and perks at M&S, which she was proud to work for, but now she says:

“Everything is being taken away from us. I wanted to see my kids through university but now I’m not sure I’ll be able to. It really frightens me.”

In a meeting with its head of retail, M&S confirmed that 2,700 M&S employees will lose over £1,000 per year, and 700 will lose over £2,000 a year. Some of the employees who have got in touch with me are going to lose—this is hard to believe—up to £6,000. To be clear, that is after their basic pay is increased.

M&S maintains that this is just a proposal. It cites its “compensation package”, which compensates staff members for 30% of their projected losses not including how much they will lose in terms of pension cuts. From the paperwork I have seen and the experience at B&Q, I think M&S’s plans are a foregone conclusion. To be clear, it is not as if head office staff are getting the sort of pay cut they are dishing out to long-standing shop-floor staff.

There were a number of options M&S could have pursued. Other companies have invested in skills to improve the productivity of their employees. Ultimately, M&S has decided to offset a basic pay increase for some staff by cutting the pay for others.

There are many more examples of UK industrial policies letting down hard-working loyal employees. Just consider the recent discovery of Hermes, the delivery company, using self-employed workers and paying them less than the legal minimum wage, and HMRC’s investigation into Sports Direct’s working practices. Both companies are undermining the integrity of Government policy. These are huge institutions we are talking about, not small local businesses; their profits are in the millions of pounds, and they employ thousands of people.

I was delighted that the Chancellor committed to look very carefully into the case of M&S earlier this week, but I want to tell the Minister today that it is not good enough to introduce a policy like the national living wage without policing it. If Britain has been promised a pay rise by this Government, then Britain deserves to get a pay rise.

Will the Minister write to the M&S chief executive, Steve Rowe, to express the Government’s concerns, culling on M&S to reverse its plans? I absolutely endorse the Prime Minister’s commitment to building a UK economy that works for all, and her Government must start by addressing the causes of low wages. People who work hard and play by the rules need a defender in national politics. Both the Government and those on these Opposition Benches have a responsibility to be that champion.

2.28 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Like many Members who have already spoken, my contribution centres on rail services, in particular the recent decision by the Office of Rail and Road not to approve an application for direct services from Cleethorpes through to London King’s Cross.

To provide historical context, I happen to have an Eastern Region timetable for 1964, and Members should be aware that there were at that time two direct services from Cleethorpes to London King’s Cross. But before Opposition Members get excited and say, “That was in the nationalised British Rail days,” I should also point out that actually in 1992 British Rail announced it was scrapping the direct services from Cleethorpes.

Since then, although the service has improved in the sense that it is more regular, it does involve a change. The Government have repeatedly pointed out that if we are to improve the local economy and extend growth, we will need greater transport connectivity. The Humber region has the largest port complex in the country and it is developing the offshore renewables sector. Calls for regular direct services are supported by business and industry, the chamber of commerce and the two local enterprise partnerships to which the local authorities belong.

Two years ago, GNER lodged an application with the regulator to operate four daily trains between Cleethorpes, Grimsby and King’s Cross via Scunthorpe and Doncaster. I recognise the need to regulate capacity on a network that is already overcrowded, but I question...
whether the rules and regulations that govern the regulator actually work in the best interests of passengers. Perhaps they work more to protect the market share of the train operating companies.

**Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con):** The direct line to London from Cleethorpes that my hon. Friend has mentioned, which was scrapped in 1992, ran through Market Rasen in my constituency. Since 1992, therefore, the good people of the town of Market Rasen and its catchment area of nearly 60 square miles have had no direct service to London at all. Is it not incumbent on the Government and the rail regulator to consider the interests not only of the big operators but of the local people? Can we have a delegation to the new Secretary of State to try to impress on him the need to serve rural lines?

**Martin Vickers:** I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for his intervention. He has stolen one of my lines: I was going to conclude by asking for a delegation to go to the new Secretary of State and to the rail Minister.

The rail regulator operates under criteria set down by the privatisation legislation, which state that the regulator must promote improvements in railway service performance, protect the interests of users of railway services, promote the use of the network for passengers and goods and promote competition for the benefit of rail users. The criteria go on to state:

“We would not expect to approve competing services that would be primarily abstractive of the incumbent’s revenue”.

In other words, it is there to protect the market share of the big franchise holders such as Virgin East Coast. I understand that the franchise holders pay an enormous fee to the Government for the privilege of operating the east coast main line or any other line, but I question whether the present criteria operate in the best interests of the passenger.

The regulator, in its decision letter, goes on to state:

“We have a long-standing policy of not approving new open access services that we consider are ‘primarily abstractive’”—that is to say, services that would abstract funding from the main operator. I repeat that this sounds far more like protecting the operators than providing better services for passengers. In the decision letter, the regulator refers specifically to the application to run services to Cleethorpes, stating:

“These financial impacts would have been reduced had the application focused on serving…just the Cleethorpes line”.

Because the application included additional services into Yorkshire, serving the Bradford and Halifax area, that would have impacted too greatly on other operators. The letter continues:

“On balancing our statutory duties, particularly those to promote improvements in railway service performance, protect user interests and promote competition against our duty to have regard to the Secretary of State’s funds, we saw the abstraction as a significant adverse impact for this option.”

New rolling stock is coming into the network, thanks to the improvements and investment that the Government and the train operators are making in the coming years. That will release rolling stock that is currently in use elsewhere for use on secondary main line services. Services through Market Rasen and Lincoln going through to Grimsby and Cleethorpes suffer because they are not part of the electrified network, and there is only a limited number of diesel units available to serve those routes. However, some new bimodal units are becoming available that will be able to run the last few miles under diesel power. This is an ideal opportunity to extend services to places such as Cleethorpes.

Hints from the rail regulator suggest that it sees the difficulties in the present system and would like to accept more open access operations, but as I have said, the criteria are restricting it at the moment. The new rail Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), successfully campaigned for direct services to his Blackpool constituancy, off the west coast main line, so he ought to be sympathetic to the requests from my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), me and others in northern Lincolnshire for improved services.

When the Secretary of State for Transport introduced the privatisation legislation in 1992, he said:

“Our objective is to improve the quality of railway services by creating many new opportunities for private sector involvement. This will mean more competition, greater efficiency and a wider choice of services more closely tailored to what customers want.”

I think that that has been achieved in part. As I have said, the services into my area have been vastly improved compared with the British Rail days, but we have a long way to go. Customers are rightly demanding more and better services. I urge the Department for Transport to drop its opposition to new long-distance open access services on routes that are not currently served by direct services. We need not only better access to the London network but improved east-west connections, and I urge the Minister to pass my concerns on to the Secretary of State for Transport and tell him that it is time to put passengers ahead of the train operating companies.

2.36 pm

**Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab):** I should like to start by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for the return of this popular general debate. I want to emulate the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who always gives us a tour of his constituency in these debates. It is good to see him in his place. Most importantly, I want to welcome the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, the hon. Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), to his post. Behind every great Prime Minister stands the hon. Gentleman, and I am sure that he will do a fantastic job.

I want to raise the concerns of my constituents, and my themes today will be Walstead Road, Great Barr and the Broadway campus of the University of Wolverhampton. They might not mean anything to other hon. Members but they mean a lot to my constituents. Walstead Road is a long, leafy road in Walsall South, and in the summer of 2012, Walsall Council decided to have a consultation to see whether the residents wanted humps on the road. Many people were concerned that they had not had an opportunity to respond, and they raised their concerns with me. The council interprets a non-response as a response in favour, so let that be a warning to everyone: always respond to surveys! As a result, the road is littered with humps.

The council is not listening to the residents. One of the residents, Tracey Clifford, undertook a survey and found that 73 households, out of the 97 responses
she received, were having difficulty in dealing with the humps. They had problems when they were exiting their drives, there were personal injuries and their cars were damaged. I have had three meetings with the council, and I am coming up against a brick wall. When I asked for the evidence that speeds were being reduced, I was given a pile of traffic logs 2.5 inches high from 2014 to go through. In 2015, the residents spoke to a police officer who said that people were exceeding the speed limit of 30 mph.

According to the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 2002, as amended in 2011, a repeater sign cannot be placed in an area when the lamp posts are situated within 200 yards of each other. I was not aware of that, and I think it is slightly strange. The residents have asked for a watchman sign, just like the one on Sutton Road, so that drivers can see their speed flashing up on the sign. Ideally, my constituents on Walstead Road want what the Faculty of Public Health has recommended. Cutting the speed limit to 20 mph cuts road deaths and injuries and is safer—the perfect solution. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will agree that residents should be listened to, and that the speed limit should be cut to 20 mph to make them safer.

The other great saga is that of Great Barr park and hall, which has been going on since 2014 and relates to a planning application on green-belt land that goes against both local and national policy. The former Planning Minister, the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), wrote to Members on 7 July, stating that the Government had put in place the strongest protections for the green belt, and that the green-belt boundary should be adjusted only in exceptional circumstances through the local plan process and with the support of local people.

There is no demand for housing at Great Barr, and yet residents are left with this planning application and planning officers have to sift through mounds of paper to decide whether it should go through—despite the whole thing going against local and national policy. It should either be refused or withdrawn. Does the Deputy Leader of the House agree that my constituents require certainty about this application? Otherwise, they will have to wait until the council decides whether it will have a meeting and then push the application through without residents knowing about it.

The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) mentioned nurses and the importance of nurse training, which leads me on to the third big issue in Walsall South—the Broadway. The University of Wolverhampton has been told by the council that it must build a road costing £1 million to provide an exit from its Walsall campus on to the Broadway, leading to two sets of traffic lights within 50 yards of each other and then an exit on to one of the busiest roads in Walsall South.

What was the evidence for building the road? At every meeting that I have had with the University of Wolverhampton, it has said that the council is insisting on the condition, but the council says that no officer has said that they want it. Following the first consultation, the evidence to the planning committee included 22 letters of objection and a 67-signature petition against the proposal. After the re-consultation, there were 60 letters of objection, a 450-signature petition and just six letters of support. However, the council decided that the condition should be imposed. The £1 million should be spent on the nurse training that the university does so well, and on providing bursaries to invest in local skills, not concrete.

I want to end on rubbish. Some hon. Members may think that that is what I have been talking all the time, but it really is an issue in my constituency. I was at Caldmore Green on Saturday and saw the detritus of takeaways, bottles and paper, but just one bin. Members may not remember the Keep Britain Tidy campaign, but it was started by the Women’s Institute and had that lovely logo of a person with pointy feet and arms putting litter in a bin. Will the Deputy Leader of the House kindly ask the Government whether we may restart that campaign? Many people who visit this country or form part of new communities—and even those who live here—are not aware of the law on litter. We need to keep Britain tidy.

I wish you a great recess, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank Nooelen Delaney, who is retiring, for looking after us Members in the Tea Room. I thank all Members, the Library and everyone else. It has been a momentous, historic time, and I hope we all have a good rest.

2.43 pm

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) for her well-made points. I absolutely believe in keeping Britain tidy and would be happy to join any such movement. I am lucky in my constituency and applaud the Friends of Bushy and Home Parks. Everyone knows that they should always take their litter home when out in the parks over the summer—rubbish is particularly damaging to the parks’ wildlife. I am grateful to those in the community who do regular litter-picking in addition to the good job done by the council. I also welcome the new Deputy Leader of the House to his post.

Like the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), I have concerns about rail services. I absolutely agreed with my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes when he said that passengers must come ahead of rail companies. I have had many meetings and have been in communication this week with South West Trains. I note that the franchise is coming up for renewal, and when I met South West Trains and other bidders I made clear what standards are expected at the eight stations in my constituency, including Twickenham, and on the network.

The problems are both chronic and acute. The chronic problems include the lack of regular and frequent trains at all our stations, which is appalling considering that many passengers travel into London to work. That lack has economic consequences. Trains are not frequent enough at any of the stations on Sundays. This is the 21st century and we should be appreciating passengers and the different lifestyles that require regular services every day of the week. Unfortunately, every single station in my constituency suffers from cancellations and delays and from overcrowding. Those are the chronic problems between the temperatures of 5° C and 25° C.

We are in the 21st century and have predictable weather. We were all told about the high temperatures this week—one does not have to be a climatologist—and that leads me to South West Trains’ acute problems.
This week, the line has not been functioning properly and conditions have been unhealthy. When the temperature is over 25°C, a code of conduct should apply—I hope the new Rail Minister will take that on board—and adequate supplies of water must be given out free on platforms when there are delays or overcrowding. We can predict temperatures for the next few years—the next generation—and they will persist, so there must be a plan for air-conditioned trains on our suburban network for people who regularly travel into London.

The previous Mayor of London, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), introduced the Oyster card system into my area, which is great for commuters who do not have much time, but there must be a way of refunding to Oyster cards following delays. Like many of my constituents, the service that I experience when getting home is not good enough—sometimes 2 hours instead of a 40-minute journey—but it is impossible to navigate the website to try to get a refund, and it is even harder when using Oyster. Like most people, if I cannot do it within two clicks, I give up. There must be a way of putting the passenger first and making refunds easy.

There must also be a better way of communicating. There was no information this week on the platforms or at station information points about the duration of delays, which is critical for people if they have medical problems, are tired or need water.

Dr Mathias: I thank my hon. Friend for that important point, as more and more people will be getting rid of Oyster cards and so we also need a tap-and-refund system there, putting the passenger first.

If Ministers or any of their family are travelling by air over the summer—I will not be, but I know many people will—I ask them to give a thought to the three quarters of a million people suffering from levels of more than 55 dB Leq or to the quarter of a million people suffering from levels of 57 dB Leq. I ask them to give a thought to the fact that if there is expansion of Heathrow, it will particularly affect my constituency; more people under that flightpath will be affected than are affected around the Paris, Amsterdam, Munich, Frankfurt and Madrid airports combined. On a medical level, I do not think this Government wish to inflict that on their residents. I hope that Ministers, including Transport Ministers, will be aware, every day during the recess, when the nitrogen dioxide levels are above European Union or World Health Organisation standards—I do not mind which are used, because both show this is unhealthy. We need a better, not a bigger, airport for such a populated area.

Nevertheless, I wish everybody a wonderful time. I am very proud of that and I hope you are, too. I am equally proud that it has restored the ability of Back-Bench Members of all parties to raise issues of concern to their constituents that other people may often think go unremarked. Even more importantly, when Members of Parliament are berated and abused regularly for failing to do their duty or for not doing what they should do, members of the public watching or reading these debates can see the absolute variety of work that Members of Parliament do which is unsung but vital in their constituency.

This debate is therefore very important, particularly for someone who represents one of the five most deprived constituencies in the UK, where there are very low incomes. This is not a competition, but Members in those constituencies have a high number of cases, and those cases deserve to be brought into the cold light of day so that people understand how many others live. I say that without any side, but it may be more difficult for some to understand the impact on individuals and on families of economic crises and of the swathe of policies and politics we discuss in here; it is much harder to ignore that when one represents a constituency that has very great difficulties if we get it wrong in this House.

I want to talk about a number of constituency cases, but one thing I ought to get on the record first—I do this without delving back into an issue decided in the recent referendum—is why people vote the way they do. I can hazard a guess about how some of my constituents voted. Of course they were concerned about the European Union and many were concerned about immigration, but many also used the vote in the referendum, as they rightly use votes in general elections and local elections, almost as a cry for help; they were almost saying, “We have problems. You need to look at us. You can no longer ignore us.” People do that in different ways. I am not saying that that influenced the outcome of the recent referendum, but I am saying that we here, and the people in and around constituencies like mine—people in the city of Nottingham, in my case—ignore that cry for help at our peril if we continue to feel that people can be marginalised or alienated from our politics and our politicians. That will not apply to many Members in here now; by definition, they are assiduous constituency Members by the very fact that they are here for this debate. I hope very much that we all take that lesson to heart; there is a divide in our society and in our country, and it is incumbent on all of us to do something about it.

I wish quickly to raise three cases to demonstrate the breadth of the things that Members of Parliament deal with and as an excuse to thank people who have been involved, as we all know, in helping us on our casework and helping us to be good Members of Parliament. Like everyone, I want to thank my staff, both in Westminster and in the constituency; across the House, these people make us the Members of Parliament that we are. I want to place that very much on the record.

I wish to highlight one particular case. My constituency staff worked incredibly hard to help a young man called Max Buxton, who has a severe hearing impairment. He was on an apprenticeship, and his employer made glowing comments about Max’s energy and dedication at work, but, in order to progress, Max had to climb the
apprenticeship ladder. To do that, he had to pass an English qualification. Unfortunately for Max and for many other young men and women, their first language is British sign language, and it is very difficult for them to understand English, particularly written English. At my request, my staff raised this matter over and again with the relevant Ministry. I will not go into all the details of the case, but, after many months, it fell to me to do something that has changed the rules around qualification for climbing that apprenticeship ladder. After a visit to the Minister recently, he said that he would look at, and indeed change, the rules around British sign language so that it is equivalent to the English qualification.

That is wonderful news for Max Buxton and for colleagues in other constituencies who have similar problems, and that is the way that we work. When you—if I may use that expression, Madam Speaker—and colleagues around the House win a case for a constituent, they are also winning it for many other constituents, particularly when we help Governments of all colours to see the light and change the rules.

By working closely with people from another constituency—it happened to be Hull—I helped children in my own constituency to take up the free dental check that is there for all children. It was something that we had tried to do locally, but found that we could not do it as well as we wanted to, so we used an example of a practice called Teeth Team. Chris Groombridge and his team came to help us, and are still helping us. The moral of this story and this brief intervention is that if we continue to work together in this House, across parties, on the big issues and on the small, we can change our society and the lives of our constituents for the better.

2.47 pm

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) and to hear in this case—forgive the pun—how he has been getting his teeth into his local constituency issues for the good of us all.

Today, I would like to speak for my constituents of Norwich North on the subject of exiting the European Union. Brits have just taken part in a giant democratic exercise about that relationship, and I thank people for that, however they voted, and whatever lies ahead. The result was clear, and hard work now has to follow to put the country’s wishes into practice. We all want what is best for Britain, so we should all work together in a calm and thoughtful way.

Our membership of the European Union is a fundamental constitutional question, and one that could not have been ducked forever. I am a democrat first and foremost, and it was right to use a referendum as the means to settle that kind of question. The result does raise arguments about what it means for the future of our parliamentary democracy. If we can hold a referendum on this, then why not on everything else? Do we even need a Parliament?! There is a very clear distinction to be made, though, as there are fundamental constitutional questions. In such cases, it is right to put those decisions directly to the people. The detail and practical implementation of the decision is then the job of the Executive, scrutinised by Members of Parliament. The majority wish in this referendum is a clear instruction to Parliament.

Like many MPs, I have had hundreds of people getting in touch since the referendum, reflecting on the result. Most of my constituency mail comes from those who voted remain and who are understandably worried about the future. Norwich voted by a majority to remain, but that refers only to the Norwich City Council area. My own constituency is not the same as that area. It is never a simple maths job to speak in this place for all constituents on this or on any other issue. Before the poll, most constituents who got in touch wanted to persuade me to vote out. After the poll, I am hearing most from people who want to persuade me to vote against going out. It is funny how that happens, but it reminds us that there is a silent majority that never gets in touch with its Member of Parliament. Counting all those people who have been in touch on either side of that debate still numbers only a few hundred of the 67,000 I represent.

I welcome any tool, such as a referendum, that encourages so many more voices to be heard. However, it is clear to me that the point of a referendum is that the whole electorate counts together—in this case, the whole of the UK. As an MP, first, it is my job to support the best for Britain after this clear instruction, and secondly, it continues to be my job to work for everyone I represent in Norwich North, whichever way they voted on this issue or any other.

Some of my constituents are reflecting on how the poll was run, concerned that just a simple majority was used to define the result on a complex question. There is a clear precedent here. Referendums are decided on simple majorities. Consistency is important and allows a legitimate process. In a healthy democratic society both sides accept the result, recognise the concerns that the other side might have, and then come together in unity. I recognise this in my constituents. While some are celebrating, others who have been in touch are unhappy. What we cannot do is deny the result or denigrate fellow citizens.

Norwich is a proud and old city, but with a youthful population. Some constituents share my own deep concern in particular about the generational rift exposed by the referendum. What happened, in age terms, at this referendum is quite clear. A large majority of younger voters opted in, and a large majority of older voters opted out. Bluntly, the younger generation was outvoted, and many are now contemplating the result with some concern for their future. But, again, democracy is democracy. We live by it and we accept the result.

I am always concerned by turnout rates, in which younger people generally vote less than their elders in Britain. Never mind whether this is a new or an old battle, a new or an old issue, what we are seeing is that younger voters are not coming out in sufficient numbers to fight any battle. Democracy works thanks to those who take part, so if people care about something, they simply have to be there. They are not at many elections. We cannot have a major democratic event, and considering that many people around the globe still literally die for one person, one vote, we should appreciate the robust lesson that politics actually means something.

I therefore call on the next great reforming Conservative Prime Minister to heal this division. The health of democracy depends on all being represented, and it
must balance the needs of different generations. It is the duty and the opportunity of the new Government to reach out to young voters now and offer them a future.

Siobhain McDonagh: On that point, and given the hon. Lady’s position on the all-party parliamentary group on voter participation, will she look seriously at automatic registration so that we get young people to the point where they can use their vote?

Chloe Smith: The hon. Lady knows that I look seriously at all these issues. Indeed, I have chaired that APPG and helped to produce a report that goes into that option and a number of others for ensuring that as many people as possible are registered to vote. I know that that is an issue that the hon. Lady has worked on in some detail.

Let me press on to the situation of EU nationals in my constituency—that is, several thousand constituents, friends, colleagues and family members. I welcome the Government’s early reassurance that there has been no change to the rights and status of those people, and confirmation that when we do leave the EU, the Government fully expect their legal status to be protected, alongside our goals for our citizens living in the other European countries.

I very much welcome the contribution made by immigrants in Norwich and across the UK to our economy, history and society. Norwich is a friendly and welcoming city. I was concerned, like many in our city, by an arson attack on the shop and home of a Romanian. It is still too early to rush to any conclusions about the motives for the attack, but whether it was racist or just plain criminal, it is hateful behaviour and it has no place here. The response of the community has been impressive. Norwich does not welcome racism or any form of aggression. Let us be clear that those who have made Great Britain their home are respected and valued.

Looking ahead, the referendum result provides a clear instruction to the Government that the majority wish is for a change in the way that Britain handles immigration from Europe. However, leaving the EU must not mean leaving behind a strong economy or a strong cultural exchange. In the east of England, almost one in every 10 jobs is linked to trade with the EU. We had the prospect of this historic, spectacular hill and no change to the rights and status of those people, and confirmation that when we do leave the EU, the Government fully expect their legal status to be protected, alongside our goals for our citizens living in the other European countries.

Norwich, in particular, needs a good deal on financial services. The financial services sector makes the largest contribution to the economy of Norfolk and Suffolk. Norwich is the largest general insurance centre in the UK, with a heritage going back more than 200 years, and it is going strong today, employing thousands of people. Firms will now be looking for a technical environment of regulation that allows them to thrive in the UK and to thrive outside London, too.

In Norwich, we expect to be able to do the same in our exciting digital and technology sectors so that we can attract investment and talent. We also enjoy an ambitious science sector, a thriving cultural scene and a strong tourism industry. All of this requires an outward-looking attitude. Britain must remain a successful economy—jobs and livelihoods in my constituency depend on it.

3.6 pm

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Following on from the comments of the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen), I want to raise an issue that is of extreme importance to my constituency.

Gillies hill is a beautiful area of woodland to the south of Stirling. Its spelling gives a clue as to the origin of the name—it is the gillies hill, and its historical association with the battle of Bannockburn gives it its heritage importance. It is reputed to be where the gillies—the sma’ folk who followed the Scottish army to the battle behind the enemy lines—were camped. At the turning point in the battle, that was where they rattled their pots and pans. They acted as if they were reinforcements coming down the hill, and the English army turned and broke. I will leave it for historians to argue about the truth of that, but the hill has been called Gillies hill for 700 years, and that in itself says there must be something in this tale, and it is extremely important.

Why is the hill controversial now? An application for quarrying of Gillies hill has been made. Regrettably, there was quarrying of a large chunk of this historic and spectacular area in the 1980s, and it was controversial then. I remember well, when I was growing up in the village of Cambusbarron, which is on the side of Gillies hill, that massive trucks would carry the aggregates away on a daily basis, driving up and down through the village. There were instances of bits of rock landing on people’s houses and causing damage.

The quarrying stopped in the early ’90s. We understood that permission was to finish in around 2007 or 2008—that was when the extent of the permission would be up. It was therefore really disappointing when, in January 2007, as I was out knocking on doors down in Causewayhead in my constituency, we felt the ground shake—literally—because of test blasting about five miles away for renewed quarrying. What had happened was that the local council—Stirling Council—had extended the permission to the 2040s because of a new European directive, and nobody was aware of the change. In essence, virtual permission had been granted right through, and we had the prospect of this historic, spectacular hill being destroyed, as a large chunk of it already had been.

Bob Stewart: Is planning with regard to this quarry the responsibility of the Westminster Parliament, or is it a Scottish national responsibility?

Steven Paterson: Planning legislation is now devolved to Scotland. The original quarrying planning legislation—and indeed some of the stuff that is still enforced in Scotland—is Acts of this Parliament, because it goes back a number of decades. So, yes, strictly speaking, planning is now with the Scottish Parliament, but most of the Acts of Parliament on which these things are based were formed down here.

That is not intended to be a criticism of this place. Quarrying has its place, and it is important, but this hill is the wrong place for it, and there is a massive local community campaign against it, involving hundreds of
people. For example, just a few weeks ago, I joined the march of the gillies, an event in which several hundred people walk from Cambusbarron to the Bannockburn battlefield to protest against quarrying of this area.

I am sure that Members will be very interested in the Save Gillies Hill website—savegillieshill.org.uk—which gives information about why the campaign is important. It outlines the history of the hill and gives information about the flora, many of which are endangered species. Protected wildlife such as red squirrels, badgers, pine martens and peregrines also live on the hill, and it is used heavily for pleasure and recreation, including running, bikes, motorbikes and even horses. It is a fantastic resource. From the top of Gillies hill, people can look down on Stirling castle several miles to the north and over the castle to the Wallace monument. That will give anyone who knows Stirling an idea of what I am describing.

The campaign is ongoing. I want to highlight two things in the time remaining. Unfortunately, a planning application has been made for permission to begin the re-quarrying of the site, which would take a huge further chunk out of it. That will have to be dealt with in the usual way. An appeal has been made to the Scottish Government on the grounds that Stirling Council did not determine the application—which is regrettable, to put it mildly—and it has been referred for that reason. That process is ongoing.

When I was a local councillor I was very concerned about the issue, for the reasons I have given, and we investigated every avenue we could think of to find a way to stop the quarrying of this historic and significant area. We considered using the provisions of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 to designate the area as a local nature reserve, which would prevent quarrying from taking place there. Two years ago, I tabled a council motion, which was unanimously agreed by all parties, asking the local council to come back with options and the costs involved, because a compulsory purchase order might be required for all or part of the hill in order to make it a local nature reserve and give it the protection it needs. Two years later, I am a Member of this place and not of the council, which, unfortunately, appears to have taken no action, which is a matter of extreme regret.

I have asked the council to get the information to the councillors so that the wider public can be made aware of what would be involved in granting Gillies hill the protection to which it is entitled. I hope that the council will take my remarks on board and acknowledge that it has been asked by every council member from every party, unanimously, for that information. I hope that it will be made available sooner rather than later, particularly given that the live planning application will be determined later this year. Given that the council has had two years to get the information to the councillors and, therefore, to the public, I very much hope—in fact, I demand—that it puts the information in the public domain so that we can have a proper debate in the time that we have left.

The good thing about the planning application is that designating Gillies hill as a local nature reserve would not impinge on it—it would stand separate from it—so it is something practical and tangible that we could do to offer Gillies hill protection. I hope that that happens and I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to raise this important issue for my constituency.

3.13 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson). Given that Staffordshire is often used as the quarry for much of the midlands, I very much sympathise with him. It is also a great honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), who made a very thoughtful speech.

On Monday, I saw two reasons why there is great hope in Stafford for the economic future. One was the almost-completed General Electric factory on the Redhill business park, which Staffordshire County Council set up a few years ago and which will be an extremely important source of employment and innovation for the future. General Electric will base its automation division there. The second was Biomass Power, a manufacturing and design company that makes biomass equipment. I visited its gasification plant, which will assist the Bombardier works in Belfast in Northern Ireland. That will help Bombardier reduce its energy costs, which is one of the reasons why it will be successful in Belfast. As a result of these and many other initiatives, the percentage of jobseeker’s allowance applicants in Stafford has fallen from 3.2% to 1% over the last six years. During that time, we have welcomed two new SIGNALS regiments, 1 and 16, and they are already playing a major role in the life of our communities. They have been a welcome addition to our community.

A new retail development is due to open in the coming two months on the edge of the town centre, and we need to ensure that it does not suck the life out of the middle of our town centre. The borough council is working with many people, including me, to see what we can do to bring more life into our beautiful town centre.

Stafford is a great centre for volunteering. The proportion of volunteers per head of population is one of the highest in the country. One of our excellent local volunteering organisations is Staffordshire Women’s Aid, which has just opened a new refuge. I very much hope that a Home Office Minister, or my right hon. Friend the new Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who is a Staffordshire MP, will come and open it formally at some point.

Stafford is building large numbers of houses. We have an excellent local plan, which means that the houses are, by and large, being built in the right place, but I would like to point out the problems that speculative development brings. With a good local plan, there is absolutely no need for speculation, because we have planned the number of houses that we need. Speculative development simply wastes everybody’s time.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his support following the closure of Rugeley B power station. Will he join me in trying to get all parties—national and local government—to do everything they can to get the site redeveloped as quickly as possible?

Jeremy Lefroy: Of course. My hon. Friend has done incredible work on that and I will support her in whatever way I can, because the site is on the boundary of my constituency as well.
I want to make two other quick points about housing and planning. First, I have already raised in the House issue of the lack of enforcement. It is so important to ensure that when planning permission is given, development is carried out in accordance with it, and that developers do not try to take bits away or add bits that have not been approved. Secondly, could we find a way of ensuring that the new roads that are put into new housing estates are quickly available on maps, especially electronic maps and satnavs? For many months, if not years, those roads do not appear on such maps, so people do not know how to get to the new houses that are being built.

I want to talk briefly about health. The county hospital, about which I spoke many times in the previous Parliament, is now doing well. The accident and emergency department is seeing more people in 14 hours a day than it did in 24 hours a day at its peak, although I continue to urge the restoration of a 24-hour service, which I believe is vital. Many of the wards in the hospital are being refurbished. The stroke unit—a rehabilitation ward—is under review. Many of my constituents have pointed out how important it is. It is all very well talking about helping to rehabilitate people at home. If that is best for the patient, that is fine. In many cases, however, such patients are better served by going to the rehabilitation ward as day cases or for a few hours in a day.

I raised this morning with the Leader of the House the question of drug and alcohol treatment in Staffordshire. We face a cut of 10% in the funding for such treatment and the closure of some excellent units. That cannot be right, and it has to be stopped somehow. I have also raised the question of health visitors. The amount of money dedicated to health visitors is under review, if not being cut. Health visitors play an absolutely vital role in Staffordshire, as they do across the country. Reducing their numbers will be counterproductive, and it will lead only to more pressure on acute hospitals.

The funding of the NHS is a long-term issue, which is why I have joined the right hon. Members for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and for Birkenhead (Frank Field) to look at the ways in which we could have a permanent four-lane running elsewhere.

As far as rail is concerned, the Norton Bridge viaduct has been put in at the junction on the west coast main line, and it is bringing great improvements. I am very much in favour of that, just as I am against HS2. I continue to be against HS2 because, in my opinion, there are much better alternatives. I am in no way a nimby on this, but there are alternatives that would be cheaper and would provide greater connectivity to far more cities across the country.

Finally, there is a proposal for a massive rail freight interchange in my constituency, which would take up many acres of the green belt. We must look at that most carefully. The proposals brought forward by the developers consortium are simply not acceptable at the moment, and they must be looked at very carefully. This is a national issue, and I urge Ministers to look at this most carefully to see whether there are not alternative sites for this rail freight interchange.

3.21 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I wish to speak about a very important matter that affects many people in Scotland. It is certainly not the first time the issue has been raised in this place, but, unfortunately, in the light of the circumstances, it needs to be brought to the Government’s attention again.

Yesterday, when giving evidence to the Defence Committee on naval procurement for the Type 26 frigates, First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff, Tony Douglas, replied in response to a question on when the Type 26 design would be approved, “I can’t give you a time or a date. It could be next year.” This suggestion could in effect place the Type 26 programme on the Clyde on an indefinite delay. That would be wholly unacceptable and nothing short of a betrayal of the workers on the Clyde.

The Ministry of Defence needs to come forward and be absolutely clear, open and honest about the level of uncertainty that the Type 26 programme faces. The new Minister with responsibility for defence procurement, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), could give none of the assurances on the future of the contract that were promised to the Clyde shipyards. Yet again, the future of the programme has been cast into very serious doubt.

That news came less than 48 hours after the Tories trooped through the Division Lobby—accompanied, unfortunately, by many of their allies on the Labour Benches—to vote en masse for the renewal of Trident. A blank cheque has in effect been written for weapons of mass destruction. On Monday, my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) asked the Defence Secretary whether the massive expense of Trident and the recent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies showing that UK GDP might be reduced by up to 3.5% as a result of the Brexit vote would result in a black hole in the public finances of up to £40 billion in 2020, and what that would mean for defence procurement. The Defence Secretary could not give an answer.

Bob Stewart: Economists seem to get it consistently wrong. They got it wrong on Brexit. They cannot talk about 2020 when, as far as I can see, they cannot even get it right for next week. Their forecasts are always wrong.

Margaret Ferrier: It does not matter what the figure is; we are going to spend up to £205 billion on a weapon of mass destruction that could kill hundreds of thousands of people worldwide—it is based in Scotland—so I am sorry, but I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman.

The UK’s nuclear weapons programme has a major knock-on effect for the rest of the defence procurement budget. Other massive projects are in the pipeline, including...
the Type 26 frigates, but the ring-fencing and generous contingencies for Trident are no doubt affecting that project. The workers on the Clyde appear to be paying the price for the obsession on the Government Benches with Trident and Brexit.

I cannot stress enough how much of a betrayal this represents for those shipyard workers, their families and the communities that depend on this work. They have had assurance after assurance from the UK Government, both in this place and from the Scottish Tories, but are now suffering from the continuing uncertainty over and mismanagement of the Type 26 programme. Every penny spent on Trident is a penny less for conventional defence, including the Type 26 frigates.

GMB Scotland organiser Gary Cook admitted in April that £750 million had been removed from the Type 26 programme’s budget. On several occasions during Monday’s debate, the issue of jobs was brought up—when we voice our concern about weapons of mass destruction we are told to shut up and be grateful for the jobs. Without doubt, those jobs come at the expense of other people’s livelihoods. It seems the Government care about defence jobs only when it suits their agenda.

Leaked emails have shown that delays in the delivery of the Type 26 global combat vessels will cost the taxpayer more money than proceeding with the work would. The Type 26 frigates were due to be built by BAE Systems, with work beginning in December. The Ministry of Defence then asked for savings of £500 million over five years, refusing BAE’s Systems’ offer of saving £275 million while still beginning work on time. The delays have put jobs at risk, and the suggestion in the leaked emails that those delays will end up costing the taxpayer even more money in the long term has been echoed by former First Sea Lord Admiral Lord West. The delays show the Government’s ideological obsession with making cuts, no matter the cost. By going back on the original deal and rejecting BAE’s Systems’ offer, the Tories have confirmed that they are prepared to put jobs at risk and waste taxpayers’ money by pursuing cuts across all sectors of Government.

**Steven Paterson:** The point that shines through all this is that assurances were given to workers on the Clyde in 2014. Promises were made that have been betrayed. In a week when we have committed to a 40-year programme on Trident, it really sticks in the craw that those workers are still waiting for the promises made in 2014 to be delivered.

**Margaret Ferrier:** My hon. Friend takes the words right out of my mouth. I was just about to say that Scotland has come to expect cuts and broken promises from this Government. We remember the pledges that were made just a couple of years ago. The Tory Government told us during the independence referendum that jobs in shipbuilding would be safe if Scotland voted no. If the very clear promises made to workers on the Clyde by the UK Government before the referendum were to be broken, it would be an unforgivable betrayal of that workforce, and people in Glasgow and across Scotland would not be quick to forget.

Now that I have got that out of the way, on a lighter note, I would like to take this opportunity to wish Mr Speaker, his deputies and all Members of the House of Commons a very enjoyable, relaxing and safe summer recess. I thank all the estate staff, including those at the Table Office and the House of Commons Library, the Doorkeepers, and all the people who serve us in the Tea Room and other cafeterias, including Noeleen, who I wish all the best. A special thanks must go to the Clerks and staff who look after me and other hon. Members on the Scottish Affairs Committee—I wanted to get that on the record. I will be spending my time during the recess as we all will, back in my constituency, working hard. However, we have to have a break to recharge our batteries before returning to Parliament in September. I wish everyone a happy summer.

3.29 pm

**Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): A little over a year ago I had the privilege of delivering my maiden speech, during which I set out my pledges to my constituents. I emphasised that the point is not where people come from but where they are going, and that our duty in this House is to create opportunities. I would like to use this debate to discuss the engineering skills gap and the work I have done to open up opportunities in my constituency.

One of my key pledges was to back businesses—to help them to create and retain jobs and to encourage more apprenticeship schemes—and ensure that local people, young and old, are aware of the fantastic opportunities available in Wiltshire. I also want to inspire them with the knowledge that we have some leading companies, such as Siemens, Hitachi, Good Energy and the Moulton Bicycle Company—the list is endless. In the past year I have visited more than 100 local businesses to learn more about what they need and what the Government can do to support them.

Despite the importance of this House, I must stress that it is the businesses that are the job creators that put food on the table and money in the pockets of local employees, not the politicians. We are blessed in Wiltshire with record levels of high employment, boosted by the figures that were released yesterday, and record numbers of apprenticeship schemes, but there is still a lot more to do to make sure that our disadvantaged get opportunities and to tackle the problem that we have with long-term unemployment.

The real issue in the Chippenham constituency is found by looking a little deeper. The real problem is the skills gap in technical, design and engineering roles. In September this year I will hold the inaugural Wiltshire festival of engineering, with more than 40 local manufacturing, design and engineering companies. They will meet more than 1,200 local school pupils, with the aim of addressing the local science, technology, engineering and maths skills gap, inspiring the next generation to consider those career options and dispelling any misconceptions. It is also designed to showcase the impressive array of businesses I have mentioned across the region and highlight the fact that Wiltshire is a hub for this sector.

I pledged also to address the infrastructure problems that we have locally, to help to tackle our skills gap. Owing the time constraints, I cannot explore the issues of Corsham station, how I have worked to protect the TransWilts railway service, or what I have done to address Bradford on Avon’s long-term traffic problem.
I will, however, explore the topic of the letter sent to the new Prime Minister and Secretary of State today, signed by me and 56 colleagues from both sides of the House, about a slight tweak to the English baccalaureate that we believe would dramatically improve the qualification. I have developed a reputation in the House for banging the drum on—some might say, banging on about—this topic, but it is crucial. The campaign is for the inclusion of the new, vastly improved design and technology GCSE in the English baccalaureate qualification. It is supported by the James Dyson Foundation, the Design and Technology Association, the Royal Academy of Engineering and a host of other businesses and organisations across the country.

Earlier this year, I had a Westminster Hall debate on the topic, which was well attended and supported. Many of our constituents suffer from the skills gap that threatens our businesses and fuels the local and national productivity crisis. The UK faces several challenges, with the annual shortage of 69,000 trained engineers and only 6% of the engineering work force being female. As I have stressed, businesses have told me that they cannot recruit adequately. That means that they might leave not just Wiltshire but, potentially, the country and that would turn our market towns into dormitory towns, threatening the very fabric of our communities. It is, therefore, the Government’s responsibility to ensure that our education system serves our businesses and our economic needs, as well as ensuring that students are encouraged into areas that can actually get them jobs.

Despite the fact that the EBacc has been reformed, its current form still threatens to undermine any progress being made and does not address the stigma associated with careers in engineering and STEM. There has been a massive drop in the uptake of design and technology courses, and in the schools offering them. Students do not have the opportunity to taste such careers, so how can the stereotypes be dispelled to let them understand what such careers are all about?

There has been a great deal of investment in design and technology as a course, and the new course will be launched in September 2017. It has been designed over years in partnership with business. It is robust, science-based, academic and a valuable option as a GCSE. However, it comes a little too late and will not really stop the growing trend of high uptake of EBacc subjects and five more, meaning that the credible design and technology course will be squeezed into a single or double subject option box. I hope the new Prime Minister and the Secretary of State will bear that in mind. There is a unique opportunity to include the new robust and rigorous design and technology course within the English baccalaureate certificate as one of the science qualifications, and as an either/or with computer science. This opportunity must be seized. The skills shortage is a ticking time bomb and we must get to grips with it if we are to remain at the forefront of global product design and tackle our productivity crisis.

We have a duty and an economic need to plug the skills gap on both a local and national level, and to address our productivity crisis. It is also, as I have said, threatening the very fabric of the market towns in Wiltshire, as well as the country as a whole. I have touched briefly on what we can do to improve the situation in just a few areas, in particular reforming the EBacc to include design and technology. We must address this issue to encourage and enable opportunities. If we do not, rest assured that the ticking time bomb will one day explode.

3.35 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Today at the High Court, a group of junior doctors asked the Government to clarify their position on the implementation of the new contract for junior doctors. The High Court decided that the Secretary of State may have a case to answer and has given them more time to prepare their case. As if this situation could not get any worse, yesterday the Secretary of State for Health demanded £150,000 in legal fees from those junior doctors.

Hon. Members may ask themselves why the new Member for Tooting, in the three weeks since she was sworn in, has been jumping up and down to speak on this subject. This is not an issue of party politics; it is simply about doing the right thing. Not once has the Secretary of State for Health had the best interests of patients or doctors at heart. His seven-day-a-week proposal has been fundamentally flawed from the start.

Bob Stewart: Surely the Secretary of State for Health is thinking of the patients when he says we ought to have a seven-day-a-week NHS and the ability to see a doctor seven days a week? He is surely thinking of the patients. One may disagree with him, but that is the case.

Dr Allin-Khan: Not once has the Secretary of State for Health had the best interests of patients or doctors at heart. His seven-day-a-week proposal has been fundamentally flawed from the start. The Secretary of State will not be let off. The junior doctors’ dispute will not be brushed under the carpet. The facts in the dispute remain the same and he cannot charge me £150,000 if I speak out, so I will make the facts known in this House again and again.

Our hospital departments are terribly underfunded. Staff morale is low. The Government are hellbent on breaking them. I have met hospital doctors who have finished night shifts after working 12 hours and gone straight on to the next day shift simply because there have not been enough staff to cover. I will answer the question from the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). If you are a doctor in 2016, you are constantly faced with a decision: finish your night shift and go home, leaving your already overstretched team and risking patient safety; or stay and work the extra shift, knowing you will be working dangerously long hours without a proper break—again, risking patient safety. I say to the hon. Gentleman that that is not putting patients first.

The procedures set out by the Department of Health are not being followed. The rule book set up to safeguard the women and men working on our NHS frontline is not being followed. What will it take for the Government to realise the NHS is already in crisis? The imposition of the new contract will turn the crisis into a disaster. From the very outset, the junior doctors’ dispute has been based on a false premise with a lack of robust evidence. If the Secretary of State for Health goes into any hospital this weekend, he will notice it is already open and providing the best possible service that resources will allow. When I was working as an A&E doctor at
St George’s hospital in Tooting. I worked night shifts and weekends. My department operated seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Many of us left very young families at home to serve our communities. I want to put on record my appreciation and admiration for all the doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, receptionists, admin staff and hospital porters who work hard to make this happen, and who already keep our hospitals open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The Government are attempting to open more NHS departments at the weekend—something most of us would support. What we do not support, however, is the attempt to create a fully seven-day NHS with a stretched five-day team. The type of seven-day NHS being advocated cannot be delivered on a cost-neutral basis. That is a fact. It will overstretched staff, leaving dangerous rota gaps in the week, and significantly undervalue the evening and weekend time of our junior doctors. If the Secretary of State goes ahead with imposition without adequate resource, it will be patients who will pay the dangerous price. He expects the current pool of staff to fill a bigger rota, but the rota already has significant gaps, and they will only worsen, but in the week instead of at weekends.

Before changing everyone’s contract, the Secretary of State must look at the recruitment and retention crisis. The NHS already struggles to recruit doctors into acute specialties such as mine—emergency medicine. Young doctors start full of high hopes and then leave, and imposition of the contract will only exacerbate the situation. Junior doctors want protection from their employer and to know they can report illegal working hours before they become fatal, but they still do not have that, because the new guardianship role outlined in the contract means they would be expected to report to the very people who can influence the progression of their training and who might be applying the pressure to work longer and more dangerous hours, thereby putting patients’ lives at risk. Overseeing this process is Health Education England, a group not covered by employment law in the UK. Until this changes, junior doctors will fear speaking up.

The Secretary of State, by his own admission, thinks that gender equality can be sacrificed to meet a manifesto commitment. Not only does he not acknowledge the deep sacrifices made by parents who leave their own young families to serve others on the frontline; he wants to further punish those who do. How much more must they endure? I was a junior doctor for 10 years. I have worked in an acute specialty, leaving behind my own babies to go and help other families in times of need. This is not a political soap box upon which I stand. I am working at Rugeley B is successful in finding new roles.

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Balham has already seen many regeneration benefits. It has a strong local economy and local residents have voiced many concerns about the upheaval that building a new station would create. I have spoken to many businesses in Balham and Tooting Broadway and I am clear that Crossrail 2 needs to come to Tooting Broadway. I will do everything I can, as MP for Tooting, to ensure that this happens. The transport benefit would be greater in Tooting Broadway. Building the station there would enable direct access to Wimbledon and Clapham Junction and offer many new routes into central London. I call on the Mayor of London and the Department for Transport to bring Crossrail 2 to Tooting Broadway.

I wish everyone an enjoyable summer recess.

3.43 pm

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House on his new role.

To start with, I will stick with the theme of trains this afternoon. I recently joined council leaders and the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), who is not in her place right now, at an event looking at the progress of the Chase line electrification. I have to say that the engineering works in Walsall town centre are truly impressive—I have been amazed at how they have been undertaken under the shops in such a way that the shops did not have to close—but while they are due to be completed, as planned, by the end of 2017, it has recently come to light that the class 323 electric trains required for the line might not be available for up to a year. This news emerged following various questions and letters I had been writing. I was somewhat concerned about the gap in time between the completion of the electrification engineering works and the trains being run on the line. Once the electrification of the line is up and running, it will mean faster trains and a more regular service, which will alleviate many of the problems faced by current passengers, particularly overcrowding. Without the 323 trains, however, passengers will not be able to enjoy the benefits of a faster and more regular service.

I recently wrote to the previous Secretary of State for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Mr McLoughlin), about this particular issue. As a former Cannock resident and councillor, he is very familiar with the Chase line and has always been incredibly supportive of the electrification project. I hope that the new Secretary of State for Transport will be equally supportive, although I doubt whether he could possibly know the name of every bridge along the line, as his predecessor did. I will, of course, raise specific issues with the new Secretary of State because I want to ensure that Chase line passengers can enjoy the benefits of the electrified line soon after the engineering works are complete.

I have spoken several times about Rugeley B power station, including mentioning it once this afternoon. Last month saw the end of electricity generation at Rugeley B. My immediate priorities have been about helping and supporting the workforce to find new jobs. I was particularly pleased to see so many people at my jobs fair last month, and I do hope that everyone working at Rugeley B is successful in finding new roles.
One of the other consequences of the power station closure is the loss of business rates to Cannock Chase District Council, equating to around £1 million a year—not an insignificant sum for a council of its size. Although, in time, this gap will be met by the income from the new Mill Green development—for those who do not know, it is a designer outlet village, similar to those in Bicester and Chester Oaks, that will be coming to Cannock soon—the council faces a short-term financial problem, with a gap to be filled. I recently attended a meeting with the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), and leaders from the council. We called on the Government to provide some transitional funding to help manage the short-term problem; I take the opportunity to put that on the record.

With the phasing out of coal-fired power stations by 2025, and with several announcing closure or part-closure in the coming years, Cannock Chase District Council is unlikely to be the only one facing financial difficulties as a result of the loss of business rates. I urge the Government to consider ways of financially supporting councils that are affected by the closure of coal-fired power stations.

Bob Stewart: I would like to make one other point, slightly flippantly. For generations of soldiers, that power station has been vital to learning the art of resection, or working out where we are. The power station can be seen from miles away, so soldiers can take a bearing on it, go on the back bearing and work out where they are. It will be sad not to have that aid for teaching our soldiers how to map-read.

Amanda Milling: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Those iconic cooling towers can be seen from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and right down to Tamworth and Lichfield, although we do not necessarily all agree about their beauty.

Finally, I shall move on from power stations and talk briefly about the fantastic work of the Newlife Foundation for Disabled Children—a charity in my constituency that provides specialist equipment for disabled and terminally ill children across the UK. Last week, I was proud to sponsor its incredibly impactful exhibition in the Upper Waiting Hall.

New Department for Work and Pensions figures show that the number of disabled children has risen dramatically to roughly 1 million—an increase of 20% over the last 10 years. For some time, the Government have been calculating public funding for the provision of paediatric equipment on the basis of the outdated statistic of 0.8 million. I support the calls from Newlife for the Government to review the statistics that they use to calculate public funding, and I look forward to raising the issue with the new Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work when we return to the House in the autumn.

Let me say one last thing. My office manager will not forgive me if I do not mention Watchman V. Watchman V is the Staffordshire regimental mascot, and is also the Staffordshire MPs’ entry to the Parliamentary Dog of the Year competition. I urge everyone to vote for Watchman V.

Mr Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling). As the proud owner of a collie-Staffie cross, now sadly deceased, I wish Watchman V well.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about something that happened today, and to which I alerted the House earlier in a point of order: the Government’s announcement, via a written statement—alongside 29 other written statements—of major increases in tuition fees for the year 2017-18. I want to speak in particular about the impact that it will have on students who either study in my constituency or come from my constituency and study elsewhere.

I think that the way the Government have dealt with this matter is thoroughly reprehensible. Only two days ago, we spent five or six hours in the Chamber debating the Higher Education and Research Bill. We engaged in a vigorous discussion of whether it was right to link fees to the Teaching Excellence Framework, but at no time during that process did Ministers take the opportunity to say anything about the issue. Today, however, it has been announced that from 2017-18, students at universities and colleges that pass a test, which I shall say more about in a moment, will pay £9,250 a year.

That underlines the fact that, as I said in the debate on Tuesday, the Teaching Excellence Framework is being used as a cash-in coupon. It demands no evidence of excellence in year 1; instead, it demands that providers achieve a “rating of Meets Expectations”. I think it would be mangling the English language to say that “Meets Expectations” is the same as achieving excellence, which is what the Teaching Excellence Framework is supposed to be about.

The Minister himself—the Minister for Universities and Science—spoke about the potential for increases in the debates on the Queen’s Speech:

“I can confirm that the rate of inflation applying to maximum fees for institutions demonstrating high-quality teaching is 2.8%.”—[Official Report, 25 May 2016; Vol. 611, c. 559.]

I am not suggesting that the Minister has been economical with the facts, or that the statement has been economical with the facts, but I think that making the link in that way could be regarded as being economical with the truth.

I said that I wanted to talk about the impact that the increase would have. It is not just a question of increasing the fees; it is also a question of increasing the loans by 2.8% to match that increase in the fees. That will, in due course, hit all the students from disadvantaged backgrounds. There are about half a million of them in the country, of whom nearly 34,000 are at further education colleges that provide higher education courses. Those colleges include my own excellent local college, Blackpool and the Fylde, whose higher education institute was built in 2008 with funds from the Labour Government. More than 2,800 students are now studying at the institute. Those students are now going to be hit by a double-whammy: not only will they have their grants taken away—and future students will as well—from 2017-18, and have to pay, as they knew, a fee of £9,000, but they are now going to have to pay 2.8% on top of that. If we are interested in getting young people from disadvantaged
backgrounds into higher education, and in getting their contribution to local regional economies like the north-west’s, this is not the way to go about it.

Let me quote some other figures about students doing HE at FE colleges: there are 1,800 students in that position at Blackburn college, and 1,000 at the Manchester group of colleges. With regard to universities catering to large numbers of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, there are 14,000 students in this position at Manchester Met and 8,000-plus at Manchester University.

I have chosen those examples because they are all within the catchment area that young people in Blackpool who might not be able to go to a university or FE college further away are likely to choose. It really is not satisfactory to proceed in the way the Government have done. Apart from anything else, it will tarnish the reputation of the Teaching Excellence Framework, and it is not good for this House’s processes. This should have been discussed and voted on—it will be eventually—later in the year. Instead, the Minister had a golden opportunity to discuss it on Tuesday but failed to do so. Clearly, the Government did not feel that they had a very strong case.

I ask Members to reflect on not only the damage this is going to cause to the sorts of young people I am talking about, but the dangerous slope that we go down, and which we went down earlier this year, when major issues that are going to affect people are dealt with by statutory instrument. That is what is being indicated in the small print of the Government’s statement today.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that another announcement sneaked out by the Government today was the decision to abolish the student nurse bursaries, which again is going to have serious implications for social mobility in higher education and the health service?

Mr Marsden: My hon. Friend makes an excellent and very germane point, because the abolition of NHS bursaries in the round and their replacement by loans will have a similar dampening effect on social mobility, particularly in the north-west where there are large numbers of students and institutions—Edge Hill University and others in Chester and elsewhere—where students have been turned out very successfully for the benefit of our national health services, including in Blackpool. I can think of one member of my constituency Labour party who has gone down that route.

I want to end by juxtaposing all those issues and lives and careers I have talked about with the necessity to do proper process in this House. If we are going to make decisions like this, they should not be sneaked out in a written statement when Ministers do not have the opportunity to deal with any discussion or debate for at least six weeks.

I put this on the record to the duty Minister on the Front Bench: when this matter comes to the House for proper decision, I and, I am sure, many of my colleagues will expect it to be dealt with on the Floor of the House, not squirreled away in some statutory instrument along the Corridor.
situation of having to get a loved one sectioned, and it is a very upsetting process. Rather than just saying that we are going to do something about this, we really need to improve the care of people with mental health conditions. As a Member of Parliament, I certainly see many more people with such conditions than I used to.

I hope the House already knows that Southend will be the alternative city of culture next year. We had a launch on my balcony overlooking Westminster Square last week, and it will be the best gig in the country next year.

I have said in the House on a number of occasions how disappointed I am about the re-timetabling of trains run by C2C. More needs to be done, and we need new rolling stock.

Last week, we held our second responsible pet ownership competition on the green by Victoria Tower, and I am delighted to say that it was won by my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) and her lurcher, Milo.

There have been too many instances of dogs’ food being poisoned in Southend. Apparently it is because the dogs’ owners are not picking up the mess. I hope that we can turn that round.

I am delighted that this country voted on 23 June to leave the European Union, but my goodness, aren’t there some sour grapes? I really hope that the country will come together and make the most of the opportunity we have been given.

I am disappointed that the Chilcot report has been overshadowed. I look forward to the Scottish National party’s Supply day debate, because there must be consequences as a result of the Chilcot report.

Last weekend I was in Paris for a rally in support of the National Council of Resistance of Iran. I hope that Madam Rajavi will be allowed to come and speak in this country.

The Conservatives took back control of Southend Council a month ago. We have inherited an absolute shambles, particularly in the area of waste management, and something needs to be done. The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) also mentioned waste management.

All Members have a nightmare with school catchment areas. I do in Southend, and I hope that the new Education Secretary can provide some guidance.

I am not very happy with Atos assessments, which are very poorly conducted and need improvement.

I am disgusted with National Grid for deciding that it will undertake all sorts of roadworks in Southend, gumming up the town.

I hope that the national lottery will give some support to the wonderful Southend Festival Chorus.

I am not very happy with South Essex Homes, which should certainly allow the King’s Money Advice Centre to remain.

Finally, I visited the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths on Monday. It does fantastic work.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am very surprised that he said “finally” without having mentioned that our football club West Ham United will move into the Olympic stadium and play its first match there during the recess. I am sure he will want to wish them well for the seasons and years ahead before he sits down.

Sir David Amess: I absolutely do: not to have done so would have been a great faux pas. I meant to say that London City airport is a wonderful supporter of West Ham United. Our old manager is now running the England team—good luck with that one!—but I very much hope that West Ham will win the premier league next year after the wonderful achievements of Leicester.

I congratulate the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, which is a fantastic livery company—one of 12 in the City of London—with a charter that dates back to 1327. It gives a huge amount of money to charity and is excellent on apprenticeships.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you, Mr Speaker, the other two Deputy Speakers, all the people who work in the House and colleagues a very happy summer.

4.6 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): There have been several notable contributions today, many of which have touched on the issues that I want to raise, so I hope that mine will match the quality shown thus far. I intend to talk about what I consider to be the holy trinity—not Law, Best and Charlton, but three of the most important pillars of my politics: jobs, homes and health. I believe that if people are confident that they have security and fairness at work, that they will have a roof over their head and that they will be cared for if they fall ill, we have the essential preconditions, foundations, and building blocks for creating a fair and equal society. I should make it clear that those principles are only the start and that there is clearly so much more beyond them, but I want to address them today because we cannot hope to address anything else unless we get the basics right.

I have said previously that a jobs policy does not just mean aiming for full employment; we should value the quality of the jobs that are created. Jobs must be permanent, secure and properly paid. We saw during the EU referendum campaign that telling someone on a zero-hours contract or in agency work that there is a risk to their job from Brexit just did not cut it. There is a culture in this country that views employment as a flexible, disposable concept, with people not knowing from one week to the next how many hours they will work or whether they will work at all, and yet some still wonder why millions of people chose to reject the status quo.

Even for those who have secured permanent employment, this country’s workplace protections are pathetic. How can someone give nearly two years of their life to an employer, not putting a foot wrong, and still find themselves cast aside without reason and without recompense? How can we build a country in which people feel confident enough to plan their life and for the future, if we have such a casual attitude towards the means by which they can build that future? I want a country where people have the security of knowing that if they do a good job and if their employer runs the business well, they will be rewarded properly and are likely to stay in work. What we have instead is a hire-and-fire

culture in which workers are seen as disposable commodities—figures on a spreadsheet—rather than real people with lives that matter.

The prospect of replacing people with machines has always been with us, but the future looks bleak for the millions of jobs that are set to be automated. Artificial intelligence will decimate skilled jobs, and we have the ever-present threat of jobs being exported to lower-wage economies. I am sorry to say that many politicians see that as progress and others are blissfully unaware of what the future will bring, but nobody has yet come up with a compelling strategy for how to respond to what amounts to a huge challenge for every country in the western world. If we do not start thinking seriously about how to tackle the problem, the wave of resentment that led to the Brexit vote will look like a small ripple in a pond.

Turning to homes, in every surgery I hold there will always be constituents who cannot get on the council waiting list, cannot afford private sector rents and, because of their circumstances, cannot countenance owning a home of their own. Even those in secure employment find themselves unable to match that with a secure home of their own. Successful Governments have failed to address this issue, but the current Administration seem determined to decimate social housing in this country. My constituency has plenty of sites where planning permissions have been granted for new homes, but almost every one of those has, at one stage or another, been amended to remove the obligation to build affordable housing. The situation is unsustainable, and insecurity at work being matched for many by insecurity at home is leading to the resentment I have referred to being magnified.

The final pillar of the three that I wish to talk about is health. It may be trite to say it, but we are incredibly fortunate to live in a country where no matter who you are and no matter what your means, you can be assured that if you fall ill you will receive, free of charge, some of the very best medical treatment in the world. But the Labour party’s proudest achievement, the NHS, is in mortal danger under this Government. In what has been the most unpredictable time in recent political history, with so many resignations, sackings and job changes, some would say one of the biggest surprises of this whole period is that the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt) is still in his job as Secretary of State for Health.

Put simply:

“The NHS is in a mess”

and there have been “five years of decline on all of the things that people would worry about.”

Those are not my words, but the words of the chief executive of NHS Improvement, Jim Mackey. The NHS is arguably facing its biggest challenge since its creation. It is failing to meet key performance targets month after month. NHS trusts and foundation trusts had a combined deficit of £2.45 billion in 2015-16, and the situation continues to deteriorate, yet the Secretary of State is still in his job. I know I have talked about employment security today, but that is surely taking things a step too far.

Only this week the Health Committee confirmed what we knew all along: the Government’s claim that they are putting an additional £10 billion into the NHS does not stand up to scrutiny. The Committee put the actual figure at less than half of that and went on to say that “accounting devices” are being used to “balance the books”, which “give a false impression that the current financial situation is better than it is.”

These devices include moving hundreds of millions of pounds from an already stretched capital budget to plug holes on the revenue side, depriving the NHS of the infrastructure investment it urgently needs and storing up problems for the future. They also include moving funds over from the public health budget, a move the Health Committee describes as “a false economy, creating avoidable additional costs in the future.”

In addition, there is a workforce crisis, with 15% of clinical posts vacant in some parts of London and a shocking £3.3 billion spent in the last year on agency staff, a situation that will only worsen with the announcement sneaked out today about the abolition of nurse bursaries. This toxic cocktail is only going to get worse. How long before we see a Minister say that the current situation is unsustainable and the principle of free treatment at the point of use has to be sacrificed? If that is taken away, one of the pillars critical to a stable and just society is taken away.

I consider the three pillars needed for a decent society that I have described to be crumbling at an alarming rate. My party will be spending much of the summer discussing the relative merits of our two leadership candidates, but I hope that there will be an opportunity during this debate to consider how we tackle the challenges ahead that I have referred to, so that at the end of the process we are able to present to the country a united front and a compelling answer on these issues. If we can do that—if we can look and sound like a Government ready and waiting to rebuild our fractured society—we will have half a chance of actually being able to do that.

4.13 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I warmly congratulate the Deputy Leader of the House on his well-deserved appointment to his Front-Bench role. After a rollercoaster few weeks in UK political history, this is a wonderful opportunity to come together to talk about the needs and concerns of our constituents; it has been a great pleasure to have a canter around the UK visiting many constituencies this afternoon.

I represent an expanding new town built on the historic east Shropshire coalfield. It is the birthplace of the industrial revolution and, throughout its proud history, it has embraced change and made the most of every opportunity that has come its way. It is a fantastic place to live and work, and it continues to attract new investment. It is fair to say that it is playing its part in the fourth industrial revolution with relish. With its unique urban and rural mix, Telford has an identity all of its own. It has a spirit of determination and aspiration and it always makes the best of the cards that it is dealt.

Naturally, Telford faces a number of challenges—they range from a lack of basic infrastructure to pressure on doctors’ waiting lists and school places, and issues relating to broadband—but they are often seen in any
rapidly growing new town. Back in early 2013, when I first set out my stall to be Telford’s next MP, I pledged to bring down youth unemployment, which was blighting the lives of Telford’s young people. I was as delighted as anybody here by yesterday’s job figures, which show, according to the House of Commons Library, that Telford’s youth unemployment claimant rate continues to fall to record lows.

I also pledged to fight to get Telford better connected with improved rail services and adequate mobile and broadband connections, which are essential to ensure that those involved in investment and in buying new homes can go about their business. Another pledge was to fight for a new critical care centre to be located at the Princess Royal hospital. A further one was to protect green spaces.

One pledge that was particularly dear to my heart was the challenge to keep Telford moving. We have a plethora of traffic lights at roundabouts that have sprung up overnight when no one could see any need for them, causing frustrations and delays. In the past few years, there has indeed been progress in almost all of those areas, and I am very proud to keep on chipping away at these local issues that really impact on people’s lives. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) so eloquently said, that is what we are here to do.

One area that I can safely say is of the most importance to my constituents is the future of healthcare in Shropshire and what is to become of the A&E at the Princess Royal. I have long championed a new critical care unit to join the existing women and children’s unit, and it is, regrettably, the one issue in which there has been no progress. As time has ticked by, there has been one missed deadline after another and no explanation for the delay. A final decision was due to be taken in November 2015. That was deferred to June 2016, and now I learn this week—July 2016—that it has been deferred again to some unspecified date.

Back in November 2015, NHS England was brought in to keep the project on target, but to no avail. The whole process seems to have become paralysed, with clinical commissioning groups and clinicians completely unable to make a decision. By failing to act, they are, in effect, choosing to do nothing about the future of healthcare in Shropshire, and that is no answer for my constituents who have told me time and again that this is the most important issue to them. While residents worry that they might lose their A&E provision, services deteriorate and there is a negative impact on the morale of healthcare workers in the hospitals affected, not to mention the £3 million of cost that the Future Fit programme has absorbed as a result of this inability to come to a decision.

In Telford, we have a rapidly growing population, and we also have extreme health inequalities. People come to Telford all the time, and it is absolutely right that, when they save up and buy their new dream home, they should expect fundamental services to be available to them. There has been great progress on broadband and on train services, and fantastic news on jobs, but we also need a healthcare provision that is fit for our thriving new town. I want to use this debate to highlight my constituents’ concerns and frustrations that they write to me about on a daily basis. We need a clear timetable for the completion of the Future Fit programme and we need an absolute determination to stick to it. If NHS England cannot make that happen, surely the next stop must be the Secretary of State.

I am looking forward to my summer in Telford and the opportunity to spend time with my constituents whom I am so proud and fortunate to represent. I give huge thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for enabling all of us, on both sides of the House, to come here today to focus on our constituents. After all, that is what we all do every day of the week, but perhaps we do not talk about it quite as much as we should. This is a fantastic and very welcome opportunity to highlight that.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you a wonderful holiday. I hope that everybody here can get some rest from what has been a frantically busy period in all our lives.

4.19 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Deputy Leader of the House to his new position and wish him well for the times ahead. We look forward to working with him and speaking to him on many issues.

I am going to bring something completely different to the House on this occasion. I want to speak about some of the history of Northern Ireland and, in particular, the Loyal Orders, and one of those especially. Those not associated with the Loyal Orders will immediately think of the Orange Order, and as it is the largest fraternal Protestant association in the world, that is understandable. However, there is more to the Loyal Orders than meets the eye. We have other associations, some linked to and some not linked to the Orange Order. The Loyal Order that I wish to speak about in order to enlighten Members and anyone watching about its illustrious and too often unknown history is the Apprentice Boys of Derry, of which I am a member and have been for 39 years. I am also a member of the Orange Order and of the Royal Black Preceptory.

The Apprentice Boys of Derry is not linked to the Orange Order. However, membership overlaps, as indeed it does in my case. The Apprentice Boys of Derry has a membership of some 10,000 in Northern Ireland, Scotland, the Republic of Ireland, England and Canada, with supporters and affiliates in many other Commonwealth countries. The institution seeks to commemorate and celebrate the siege of Derry, recognised as the longest siege in British military history. It goes back to the Glorious Revolution. It is called the Glorious Revolution because, as many people know, it was a rather bloodless revolution. In that revolution James II was ousted from power by Parliament in 1688, and Parliament subsequently offered the English throne to James’s daughter Mary and her husband, William of Orange. In Scotland, the then ruling body, the Privy Council, asked William to assume responsibility for the Government in January 1688, and in March that year King William and Mary assumed the throne.

The different situation across the Irish sea is what ultimately led to the siege of Derry, the creation of the Apprentice Boys of Derry and the famous battle of the Boyne. In November 1688, there were two garrisons in Ulster that were not loyal to James. They were Enniskillen and, of course, Londonderry. I listened with interest to the hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson), who referred to the gillies. He said they were small in stature,
but when the Earl of Antrim was trying to recruit some soldiers, he went to Scotland because he wanted men who were six feet-plus. He managed to get a force from Scotland, the Scottish Highlander Redshanks, who set off for Derry. On their way they made sure to strike fear into the hearts and minds of the resistance by being merciless to any opposition.

On 7 December 1688, as the King’s forces approached the city of Derry, they were met not with the welcome that they expected, but with shots and cries of “No surrender”. The Brave Thirteen, the 13 apprentice boys, as they were, are one of the central pillars of symbolism and significance within the institution to this day. In April 1689 hope arrived, in the form of reinforcements from England led by Colonel Cunningham, a native of the maiden city. The governor of that city, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Lundy, called a meeting with his most loyal supporters to discuss the surrender of the city. News of the meeting spread, however, and the citizens were furious. Lundy had to flee the city in disguise with his supporters. The impact of Lundy’s betrayal is that Unionists and loyalists across Ulster and in Scotland to this day refer to a perceived traitor as a “Lundy”. His name went down in history for the wrong reason.

On 18 April the Jacobite army reached the city, expecting the inhabitants to be overwhelmed by the presence of the king and to admit them to the city. James repeated his attempt to enter the city three times, but on each occasion he was refused with cries again of “No surrender” and with many shots. Hamilton’s forces on behalf of King James rounded up hundreds of Protestants from nearby villages, proclaiming “Let your fellow Protestants in or let them die.” The act horrified King James himself, because he had given no instruction for that to happen and in no way approved.

On 28 July two armed merchant ships, the Mountjoy and the Phoenix, sailed towards a boom protected by HMS Dartmouth. The Mountjoy rammed and breached the boom and the ships moved in and relieved the city. After 105 days the siege was over, with some 8,000 of the 30,000 inhabitants dead. The Mountjoy, like those who oversaw the siege, has become iconic in the remembrance of the siege in the Apprentice Boys and in wider loyalist and Unionist circles. Today, the siege is commemorated by the Apprentice Boys of Derry, named after the Brave Thirteen.

We have in Londonderry a week-long Maiden City festival, which culminates in a parade around the city by members of the Apprentice Boys of Derry. Our colours are crimson red, commemorating the blood of the 8,000 who died in those battles. The institution is now widely commended for how it conducts parades, which have been peaceful and successful over the years. The parade this year will be on the second Saturday of August, which is 13 August.

What is good about the parade is not just the history, but the fact that this is the one place in Northern Ireland—well, there are lots of places in Northern Ireland—where there was contention before, and now there is not. The agreement to parade in the city of Londonderry is a catalyst for other parts of the Province to have a loyalist parade in a mainly nationalist city and to have the tolerance that is needed to make that happen.

If Members want an example of how things can happen in Northern Ireland, that is the example I would give, and that is why I wanted to speak about it today.

The parade has become a tourist attraction for many people. People from Northern Ireland, from the Republic and from across the world come to watch the historical enactment that takes place on that day, and I would like to commend the Apprentice Boys of Derry for all they have done to make that happen.

In conclusion, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to thank you, the other Deputy Speakers and the Speaker of the House for your kindness to all right hon. and hon. Members in giving us a chance to participate in debates in this Chamber. I would also like to thank the Backbench Business Committee, which also makes it possible for us to come here and speak in debates. I am told I have a season ticket for the Backbench Business Committee, and whether I have or not, I am very pleased to participate in the debates in this Chamber.

I thank the House staff for all their kindness to us, and I thank the Hansard staff, who have told me they can now understand my accent and my writing, and they do not need any more help with what it should say. I thank the people of Strangford for giving me the privilege of representing them in the wonderful political and democratic institution we have here in the House of Commons. It is a pleasure to be here, it is a pleasure to represent Strangford and it is a pleasure to have so many friends in this Chamber.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I am very pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I call him my friend despite having been on different sides of the argument earlier, and despite having been brought up in Glasgow, where the Apprentice Boys and the Orange Order were not as affectionately remembered by my community—as it was, my maternal grandfather was a member of the lodge and the order. My hon. Friend brings to the Chamber an important message about the tolerance, understanding and mutual respect of the peace agreement in Northern Ireland. That is really important, and we need to make sure it is absolutely solid. If there is anything we can do to help, we ought to do that.

I have welcomed the Deputy Leader of the House to his place. I welcome the hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher) to his new place as well, and I wish him success in his role.

I want to raise a few issues. The first is London’s new cruise terminal, which is very welcome as part of London’s tourist infrastructure. It is being built at Enderby Wharf in Greenwich, and it is causing a bit of controversy. One of the big issues in London, as we know, is air quality, and Mayor Sadiq Khan has made it a priority of his administration. The one deficit in the planning application for the cruise terminal in Greenwich is that there is no shore-to-ship power supply, which means that cruise ships will be parking in Greenwich, in the middle of London, and having to run their big diesel engines 24/7 to provide their electricity. There is no planning requirement or planning regulation in that respect from the Port of London authority, the London boroughs, the European
Union or the UK Government, although other European ports do make it a requirement and Southampton would want it.

I had a long-standing meeting planned for Monday with the then Minister of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), but I got an email from the Government on Sunday saying that the Minister had been reshuffled and that the meeting was postponed. I would therefore be grateful if the Deputy Leader of the House would feed back to DEFRA that we really need that meeting to be reorganised as quickly as possible.

There are a whole number of major issues on leasehold reform. England is one of the few countries in the world that still have leasehold—it does not exist in Scotland—resulting in unfair ground rents, excessive service charges, retirement home rip-offs, restricted lengths of leases and expensive dispute resolution procedures. It took us two and a half years to get the Department for Communities and Local Government to recognise that there were not 2.5 million leaseholders in Britain. It has now recalculated the number at 4.1 million, but the leasehold reform MPs who are active in the Chamber think there are more like 7 million, and those people are being ripped off.

This area of legislation urgently needs reform, and I am grateful to the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership—the charity campaigning on this area—which helps the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and me. We are forming an all-party group on the issue in September, and I invite all colleagues to join it to ensure that we can put pressure on the Government and get leasehold reform.

Bangladesh was raised during business questions by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). He may have raised it again during this debate, but I missed his speech. There is great concern among many friends of Bangladesh in this House about the recent terrorist activity and murders of secularists, intellectuals, academics and bloggers. The hon. Gentleman organised a very good meeting earlier this week about attacks on members of minority communities. I would be grateful if the Government could do all that they can to help the Government of Bangladesh to address the question of terrorism and intolerance in that country.

On the Chennai 6, I commend the work of the Worshipful Company of Shipwrights—and, as a former shipwright, Member of Southend West (Sir David Amess). I wish them well in their new home. They will go from strength to strength.

I congratulate the 31 Tower Hamlets air cadet training corps in Mile End. I am its honorary president. Lieutenant Rex Nichols and his volunteers have been responsible for another fantastic year for the young people in the air cadets.

Secondary schools in Tower Hamlets were on the floor 20 years ago, but they are now all punching above the national average in the educational performance league tables. That means that our young people in east London, who are as bright and smart as kids anywhere else in the country, are having a great start in life. East London is sharing in the wealth of this great city for the first time in history, and a very important generation is coming through.

I congratulate all of my constituents who received honours in either the new year's honours list or the Queen's 90th birthday honours list on their achievement, especially Dr Sheila Fitzpatrick, who I declare happens to be my wife, on being awarded an MBE for her work as a national trustee of the Marine Society and Sea Cadets and as a trustee of the Sreepur village orphanage in Bangladesh, as well as for other activities. That is obviously very important to her and to me. I am very proud of what she has achieved.

In conclusion, I wish you, Mr Speaker, and your team, as well as every other colleague and all the staff of the House, a very restful recess. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak.

Paul Flynn

4.33 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): It is heartening to end on a climactic point and to congratulate Mrs Fitzpatrick on her award. This has been a splendid debate. It is one of the joys of Parliament that we have a day on which we can discuss these matters. It is politics in miniature, as we discuss matters that are of protozoan importance nationally, but of vast, gigantic importance in our constituencies.

I have the pleasure of welcoming the new Deputy Leader of the House to his post. We have jostled together on the Home Affairs Committee, where his ferocious skills as an interrogator terrified witnesses, who were subject to a cross-examination that would be worthy of a mass murderer in the High Court. Many of them, when they left the Select Committee room, went out seeking the number of the Samaritans or a trauma counsellor.

The hon. Gentleman has already reached the peak of his parliamentary career, which he cannot overtop. During our debate to congratulate Her Majesty earlier this year, he told an anecdote that will live long in the legends of this House. It concerned the vital matter of the positioning of a chain around the unicorn's neck in the stained-glass window in Westminster Hall. This anecdote was described in The Daily Telegraph, by a writer who uses the traditional and admirable English gift for understatement, as “the single most boring anecdote of all time.”

I ask you—where can he go with his career after that major achievement?
We have had a fascinating list of possible holiday destinations laid before us today. For anyone who is interested in yoga, Harrow is the place to go: it is the yoga paradise of the world. But they should watch out, because it is a hellhole for those who accumulate garden waste; it has the highest collection charges in the whole of the United Kingdom. We have heard about the joys of the Gillies in Stirling. Gillie is the Gaelic word for a servant, and we heard about the magnificent occasion when the Gillies came out and banged their saucepans and drums and convinced the English Army that reinforcements were on the way. We have heard about the joys of Bushy Park in the constituency of Twickenham, where, we were told, the airport should not be bigger but should be better. And for those with exotic tastes, there is a festival of engineering in Chippenham, which will set all our pulses racing.

A theme that ran through the debate was transport, and at least seven Members bemoaned the deficiencies of the privatised rail service. I commend to all of them a report on privatisation, published in this House in 1993 on the advent of privatisation, under the great paragon of British Rail Robert Adley—who tragically died on the Sunday before the Wednesday on which the report was published—which forecast in minute detail the problems that we are talking about today. Of course, Robert Adley was a great expert on railways, and I believe that is the supreme report of any published by a Select Committee in my time in the House. We are seeing the legacy now. The problems that we face spring from the difficulties of privatisation, rather than from any disputes that have taken place.

To his great credit, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden) cleverly used the debate to point out that today the Government have published 29 statements, which cannot be scrutinised in the House. He brought attention to the very important increase in the level of fees, and ultimately loans, that students will suffer, and to the withdrawal of bursaries for student nurses. Those vital matters are the subject of just two of the 29 statements that have been published today—in order, presumably, to bury bad news.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobbhain McDonagh) made an impassioned plea on behalf of those who are suffering from Government policy on poverty. We often talk about the state of the economy generally, but she talked about what happens at the level of the family—the difficulties that they face. I think that we will all read her speech with great interest and learn a great deal from it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) and the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) raised the crucial problem that worries us a great deal: the alienation of young people post Brexit. We are seeing the legacy now. The problems that we face spring from the difficulties of privatisation, rather than from any disputes that have taken place.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) raised, quite legitimately, the problems of the defence budget. Spending on conventional weapons is being delayed, while spending on the useless symbol of national virility has, sadly, been approved by this House.

I offer great congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan). I noticed from her maiden speech that she has the good luck to be married to a Welshman, which is rather like being upgraded on a plane. She made the very powerful point that what the Government are doing with their plans for the health service is trying to stretch the funding for a five-day health service over seven days. She pointed out that key weakness, and spoke about this matter with great knowledge and experience. Again, she is a great asset to this House, and I am sure she will have a great career. It is disappointing that the former Prime Minister’s forecast that she would be in the shadow Cabinet within a day has not been fulfilled, but perhaps it will come true during the next few weeks.

I thank everyone for what they have said today. I cannot go into all the details of what was raised, but I am sure this is Parliament at its very best—doing the work not on the great issues we pontificate about, but the bread and butter issues that concern our constituents. I believe all the issues raised will have the attentive ear of the new Leader of the House and his Deputy, and we look forward to instant results before we return in September.
difficulties involved with flash flooding and sewage coming through, and I know his constituents will be very grateful to him for doing so in this place. He is very impressive in his representation of all communities in his constituency, and he is well known and recognised for that in the House.

On a lighter note, my hon. Friend also spoke about the advantages of yoga. I know you, Mr Speaker, have often recommended Members to take up yoga in certain circumstances. I do not know whether you and my hon. Friend would like to get together on that subject, but we await further developments with interest.

The hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) spoke about the problems on Southeastern trains. He was not the only Member who spoke about train issues. There clearly are some issues, and the fact that he has raised them will have been to the satisfaction of his constituents and of others.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) spoke about the railway station and the fact that there are insufficient rail services. He also mentioned his cycling expertise. I had noticed that he has a rather painful black eye, which I was sorry to hear about, but I am reassured that the Whips had nothing to do with it. I hope he is well. I know that the summer of music, arts and culture is coming up in Gloucester. People will no doubt want to visit for that.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) spoke of her success in dealing with B&Q, and I congratulate her on that. Reducing wider remuneration packages and blaming the national living wage would be short-sighted and would yield only a one-off gain. Doing so is not in the spirit of the national living wage, and I am sure that B&Q and others are acting accordingly.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) that ultimately open access decisions are for the Office of Rail and Road to determine, and we respect its independence in doing so. However, I recognise the potential benefits that open access competition can deliver for railway passengers and others.

I understand that the Queen's handbags are made in the constituency of the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz)—so another quality product from Walsall. The hon. Lady indicated that the local authority was not listening to her or her residents about road humps. No doubt that authority will want to be rejuvenated, shall we say, in its attention to her representations. She also spoke about litter, a topic that resonated around the House, with Members on both sides speaking about it. It is a major problem. She wants to restart the Keep Britain Tidy campaign, and I will ask the relevant Department to write to her about that.

One could hear the medical expertise of my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) coming through in her remarks. She spoke about the importance of having water provided on platforms when it is too hot on crowded trains. She also spoke about aircraft noise and other pollution issues. Her expertise brings a great deal of richness to the House.

I think I am right in saying that the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) helped to create the Backbench Business Committee, so it is apposite to credit him with that this afternoon and say how much we appreciate it, as so many Members have taken part in the debate. He spoke of disadvantaged areas in his constituency and the casework that he deals with. I was struck by the way in which he thanked his staff and by the wonderful success that he and they have achieved for Max and, no doubt, many, many others. I congratulate him on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) spoke about Brexit. I know that she is particularly alive to the issue of young voters, and is on the all-party parliamentary group on voter registration. The value of her work in respect of young voters is recognised in this House, and that issue will not be forgotten about. It is very important indeed.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) spoke about quarrying on Gillies hill. I wish him well with his lobbying on that. It is a devolved matter, but he will no doubt get the requisite attention from the local authority. The wooded area he described sounds very pleasant indeed.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) for welcoming the military regiments he spoke of which have come to his area. He spoke also of the county hospital doing well. The House knows him to be a powerful advocate for his area.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), whom I had the pleasure of debating with in Westminster Hall yesterday. I can tell her that the Type 26 warships are certainly not indefinitely delayed. My information is that that is not correct. It struck me that she took particular care to thank the Clerks and staff on the Scottish Affairs Committee and to wish them well over the summer recess.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) spoke of the engineering skills gap. The Wiltshire festival of engineering that she is arranging in her constituency sounds very impressive, and I know that there are wonderful opportunities in Wiltshire. She said that she had visited 100 local businesses in the past year—what a superb ambassador for job creators in her constituency.

I welcome the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) to her place and congratulate her on her by-election success. She was a vocal advocate for junior doctors in her remarks, but I can assure her that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health cares deeply about the national health service, its patients and its staff. No doubt the hon. Lady will agree that legal action is expensive, unnecessary and unwarranted, and we hope that the matter can be resolved.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) spoke about Rugeley B power station, and some allusion was made to its beauty or otherwise. That is no doubt a matter for extensive debate, but she did indicate that she had held a jobs fair in her constituency. No doubt that was welcomed by those who worked at the Rugeley B power station and by many others. I was also interested to hear about Mill Green, Cannock’s own Bicester village in the making, and look forward to my invitation. She also mentioned Watchman V who is, I believe, the dog of the year. We wish Watchman V well as the mascot in her constituency.

The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden) spoke about tuition fees. I am pleased to be able to reassure him that the statistics show that more disadvantaged young people are now going into university
education than ever did under the Labour Government. I would have thought it right to welcome the written statements that have been released today, because Members will have a considerable opportunity over the next six weeks to study them and to return to the matters fully refreshed in the autumn.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) gave his usual extremely impressive performance. He mentioned dozens of separate items, and, if I may, I will write to him about his remarks. I was not able to write them down fast enough by hand. I will, if I may, send my best wishes to his mother, who is 104 years of age. He mentioned Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust, and I am sure we are all fully supportive of its work raising awareness of cervical cancer and the importance of cervical screening—just one of the matters that he mentioned, among many other important subjects.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) was concerned about housing, employment security and the NHS. He will be reassured, one hopes, to hear that this Government have built more housing than Labour did in its 13 years in government. This Government also introduced the national living wage and are supporting the NHS to the tune of £10 billion. My hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) spoke passionately about her constituency. It is an expanding town, and she is rightly proud that youth unemployment is now at a record low. So much is being done to continue and ensure business investment in the town. She did say there were too many traffic lights, certainly at one junction. No doubt many Members will have some sympathy with that.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) can be reassured that not only can Hansard understand him but so can everybody in the Chamber, too. He spoke passionately about the history of Northern Ireland and the Orange Order. It was a fascinating, if brief, history lesson. No doubt we will hear more in due course.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) spoke of the air quality in London, which Members from across the country no doubt take an interest in, as we in the House of Commons are subject to it. It is not quite as bad as the great stink in the Victorian period, when the curtains of the Palace of Westminster had to be draped in lime to try to disguise the aroma, but there are still pollution issues. No doubt he will continue to be alive to those issues and to represent his constituents accordingly. I will ask the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to write to him about the rescheduled meeting. He will appreciate that, with the changes that have occurred in recent days, his meeting had to be postponed. That is regrettable, but it can be rearranged. He mentioned the Company of Shipwrights, of which he is a proud member, and made a very important point about those who are detained in India. I will ask the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to write to him about that.

I take this opportunity to wish everyone well over the summer recess, in particular the staff of the House, you and your Deputies, Mr Speaker, and the Chairs of all the Committees—not only the Home Affairs Committee, although perhaps with particular good wishes to that one. Like many other Members, I would like to send my best wishes to the retiring member of staff, Noeleen Delaney. I understand she is approaching the thirtieth anniversary of her employment here. She has, no doubt, served generations of Members of Parliament with the same excellence, warmth and kindness of spirit throughout the past three decades. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

It is an honour and privilege to serve in this House. It is a duty that is borne with great humility and service by everyone on all sides. To be a servant of this House and to appear at the Dispatch Box for the first time is a great honour for me. I thank everyone for their good wishes. I wish everyone well over the recess.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful, on behalf of the House, to the Deputy Leader, whose warmth and good grace have been hugely appreciated. The same goes for the shadow Leader. It seems a fitting conclusion to our proceedings and I wish everybody a very relaxing and revitalising summer break.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,
That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

Business Without Debate

COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS
Ordered,
That Jo Stevens be discharged from the Committee on Standards and Susan Elan Jones be added.—(Christopher Pincher, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

COMMITTEE OF PRIVILEGES
Ordered,
That Jo Stevens be discharged from the Committee of Privileges and Susan Elan Jones be added.—(Christopher Pincher, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)
Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust

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

5 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I wish those Members departing the Chamber a good summer and thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting me the final debate before the summer recess. I also welcome the new Minister to the Dispatch Box.

I called this debate, following the one brought a few months ago by my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), because she, I and many Yorkshire Members are deeply concerned about the staffing levels not just at the Mid Yorkshire trust but at other hospitals across Yorkshire and the serious effect they are having on our health service. We have warned Ministers before about this, but we are deeply concerned that nothing is yet being done. Things will get worse if action is not taken.

Last year, I was contacted by a constituent, Mr Fanshawe, whose mother-in-law, Edith Cunningham, had recently died at the end of a short illness in Pinderfields hospital. As well as dealing with the grief and bereavement, Mr and Mrs Fanshawe were having to cope with the deep distress and anger caused by the way in which Mrs Fanshawe’s mother was treated and the care she received, in her final days and hours, because of serious staff shortages at the hospital.

Nursing staff were so overstretched that, at one point, Edith Cunningham had to wait two hours for a bed pan—two hours for an elderly lady in distress—and one weekend she had to wait 25 hours to see a doctor. It became clear to the Fanshawes that the staffing shortages on the ward were such that they could not leave her, so they stayed; they did her bed pans, they fed her, and when the pressure mattress they had requested was brought up, they changed it themselves, because there was no one else to do it.

I have met the Mid Yorkshire trust and the Fanshawes, and the chief nursing officer has given them a full apology and made it clear that it was an unacceptable level of care and that it was the result of staffing shortages on ward 43 at the time. Since then, the trust has continued to work on a wide range of recruitment and staffing initiatives to improve the situation.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for calling this important debate. As she alluded to, I had a debate on this issue in March, but sadly it appears that little progress, if any, has been made. Last week, I attended a patient safety walkabout on ward 2 of Dewsbury hospital, and once again patients raised issues of short staffing. Several patients had been told not to ring their alarm bell at night because there was only one member of staff on duty. The number of beds on the ward had been increased from 24 to 30, but sadly no extra staff had been brought in to accommodate the extra patients. I plead with the Minister: we need tangible progress to ensure patient safety.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. We hear continually from constituents often saying the same thing: the nursing staff are wonderful, look after them and work immensely hard, but are overstretched; there are simply not enough of them to do the job they want to do.

The trust has recruited not just locally but from across Europe and India, which has sometimes raised language issues. It is looking at new ways to recruit from the local area, and in some areas, the number of vacancies has fallen. It has also put in place processes to switch staff around to make sure that gaps are filled every day. I welcome the commitment by the chief nursing officer and the chief executive to do everything they can to fill the staffing gaps, but it is still not enough.

We agreed with the trust that the Fanshawes and the local health watch should be able to do an unannounced visit to ward 43, talk to parents and report on what they found. I quote from their report:

“Patients... reported kindness and very good care. Patients generally agreed that staff are lovely but are ‘run off their feet’”.

They found that staffing levels were better than last year,

“but it is still often a struggle and only rarely does the ward have the right quota of staff”.

Just this week, I received another email from another family with a relative in ward 43 raising serious alarms about the level of staffing on the ward and the level of care that their relative was being given. There were not enough healthcare assistants or nurses to provide the basic care and support needed. That fits with the findings last year of the Care Quality Commission, which also raised concerns about safe staffing levels. Once again, we cannot pay sufficient tribute to the kindness and hard work of the staff at the trust. However, when they are stretched in all different directions, it is in the end the patients who lose out and the staff who are deeply concerned because they are not able to provide the level of care that they want.

I am concerned, too, about the financial pressures on the Mid Yorkshire trust. It is not the only trust where the money received is simply not enough to meet rising demand. I suspect that the Minister will have been briefed on some of the financial pressures and the squeeze facing the Mid Yorkshire trust. There is a risk of services being cut not for sensible medical reasons, but simply because it does not have the funding or the staffing to provide them safely.

It is even worse than that. Even where the Mid Yorkshire trust has budgeted for the staff, it cannot recruit or retain enough to deliver the services in the way it wants and the way our communities need. The latest figures from the trust list 150 nursing vacancies: that includes healthcare assistants and safety support workers, and amounts to about 12% of budgeted posts. The vacancy rate for nursing staff in the theatre department is 17%, and it is 20% in intermediate care. If we take account of holidays, maternity leave, sick leave, stress, and temporary secondments to other departments, the gaps are bigger. Monitoring by department in May, which looked at the actual staffing relative to the planned levels wanted, showed cardiology at only 76%, stroke rehab at 65% and short stay at 70%.

The trust also measured unavailability, which encompasses the percentage of contracted hours lost owing to staff absence, including for sickness and stress. When some staff are working so hard, and some are
also being moved around from one department to another in order to cope with gaps elsewhere, facing further stress and uncertainty, it leads to higher levels of absence.

**Paula Sherriff:** I shall try to be briefer in this intervention. I was recently contacted by Dewsbury hospital, and was told that, on any given day, the minimum staffing level in the A&E department is eight qualified nurses and four healthcare assistants or unqualified nurses. On this occasion, there were three nurses and one healthcare assistant. I think that speaks for itself; clearly, it will have an impact on patient safety.

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is right, and these are the sort of individual examples that we increasingly hear about from our constituents—from both staff and patients. I have heard from staff in intensive care and in paediatrics who are deeply worried about the pressures and responsibility on them lest something should go wrong on their watch as a result of understaffing. They are deeply concerned that they will be unable to provide the care that is needed and are worried about the implications.

The trust’s planning guidance suggests that it can cope with up to 22% of the contracted hours not being provided and still provide a safe service. Beyond that, it shows that significant problems are likely to be encountered in delivering the right level of care. Overall, however, the gap is not 22%, but 26% for registered nurses and 30% for registered midwives. In A&E, the average shortfall in contracted hours is 30% and there is a similar 30% shortfall in children’s services. On some wards, the proportion of temporary staff from agencies and the NHS banks is particularly high. On acute assessment wards, 20% of the nursing staff are agency staff. On the short-stay wards, 11% of the nursing staff and 33% of the healthcare assistants are staffed from agencies and the bank.

It is not just about the pressures on nursing staff. Senior staff at the Mid Yorkshire trust say that they are doing a huge amount of work to address the nursing shortages, but they are even more worried about the shortage of doctors—not just at Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS trust, or to any individual constituent. In A&E and neurology, there is a particular problem, and there are regular and significant gaps in the contract rota for junior doctors. Some 15% of the acute medicine rota is not filled by contracted staff, and it is 18% for the emergency medicine rota, 20% for the anaesthetics rota and 20% for the surgery rota.

In practice, the trust is having to fill the rotas either with consultant staff acting down in more junior posts, or with locum staff. It is a choice between doing that and cancelling operations, or turning ambulances away. The trust is, of course, committed to providing the best service that it can provide and not letting patients down, but locum care means that medical staff do not have the relationships or the knowledge of the system that would enable them to do the best possible job, and it costs far more as well. Because the trust cannot recruit enough contracted staff, its average spend on agency doctors in the first three months of the current financial year was £1.5 million a month—and, as we know, it is a trust that faces significant financial pressures. So what is it supposed to do?

However, this does not apply only to Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust. In the country as a whole, two in five vacant consultant posts went unfilled last year, according to the Royal College of Physicians. In the north of England, there are serious staff shortages in our hospitals. That is what we hear from our constituents.

**My hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury** spoke of appointments being cancelled and waiting times being affected. What troubles me particularly is the fact that there is now a 20-week wait for the pain clinic. Because of staffing problems, patients who are suffering pain and could be supported and helped are having to wait 20 weeks to be seen.

What are the Government doing about this? All too often Ministers shrug their shoulders and think that it is someone else’s problem, or that someone else will sort it out. I contacted the Secretary of State in 2010 and 2011 saying that the training numbers that were being set by the Yorkshire and Humber Deanery, particularly for A&E, were not enough, and were certainly not enough to meet rising demand, but nothing was done. Given the scale of rising demand for healthcare and given our ageing population, far too few doctors are being trained. There is also a significant and serious regional disparity, with bigger shortages in the north and the Midlands.

It is incomprehensible, given all those pressures, that the Government should choose this moment to pick a major fight with junior doctors that ends up demoralising them, and drives many of them to consider either going abroad or leaving the profession altogether at a time when we need every doctor we can get.

The Department of Health is also taking a massive risk when it comes to nursing staff. It is ending nursing bursaries, although in areas like ours that means that many people who could have become great nurses will be put off because they are worried about the debts that they will incur, and about not being able to afford the training. It is also refusing to give a proper assurance to the thousands of European Union citizens who work in the NHS—our trust has often recruited such people because of the shortages at home—that they can stay and fill those crucial posts.

Referring to nurse training, the Minister who responded to the debate initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury a few months ago said:

“Within the current spending envelope… it is simply not going to be possible to achieve the numbers that we wish to see.”—[Official Report, 21 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 1354.]

That is not good enough. We need enough nurses, and enough doctors, to provide the care that our constituents need and deserve. That cannot simply be left to Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS trust, or to any individual trust in the country.

So many of the issues are linked, whether we are talking about the training numbers on which the deaneries decide or decisions made by the Department of Health that have an impact on morale, pay or incentives throughout the country. We now need a regional action plan setting out what the Government are going to do, and what NHS England is going to do, to address the serious shortages of both nurses and doctors in Yorkshire, because unless something is done, something serious
will happen to patient care. I do not want to warn again about this, as I did some years ago, but it still has not been sorted out, and that is not fair on patients in Yorkshire and throughout our area.

In the case raised by Mr Fanshawe, Edith Cunningham had a family who stepped in and looked after her while she was in hospital, but many more patients do not have families who can fill the gaps and step in. So for the sake of all of those patients, and for all of those who we—all of us in all parts of the House—will want to get the best possible care, I urge Health Ministers to get a grip on this and get us the regional action plan we need, before patient safety is affected.

5.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): May I start my remarks by saying what a pleasure it is to be here this evening for my first opportunity at the Dispatch Box in my new role at the Department of Health?

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) on securing this debate on a subject that I know is close to her heart and that of her neighbour, the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), who it is good to see here supporting her in the Chamber this evening. I congratulate the right hon. Lady in particular on securing this debate, the last opportunity to raise a subject in the House this side of September.

I am well aware that this is a matter of significance to Members of Parliament and obviously to the local populations they represent. I think the hon. Member for Dewsbury recently persuaded the Mid Yorkshire trust to have a public meeting to discuss these issues locally, and I congratulate her on doing that, and hope it was helpful in at least raising some of these issues.

The problem of staff shortages at Mid Yorkshire is well known, and it is recognised not just by local Members of Parliament, but was demonstrated by evidence recorded by the CQC through its inspections over recent years, not just the most recent one. Having said that, there are of course examples of good care within the trust, and I would like to add my voice to that of the right hon. Lady who acknowledged that from the comments of, I think, the Fanshawe family, who pointed out that the quality of care provided by the nursing and other staff in the hospital is very high where they are in a position to do that. I pay tribute to everyone who works in the trust—in the hospitals there—in the admittedly somewhat challenging circumstances they find. I draw attention in particular to the maternity services and children’s services, where the standards are acknowledged to be high.

There is no hiding the fact that there are problems, however, and I am not here to do so. Unsafe care was found in the most recent CQC inspection last summer, published in December last year. That is clearly the most potentially serious of its findings. This is a long way from being a high-performing trust, which is what we would all like our trusts to be. While the CQC report shows the trust had responded to previous staffing concerns and is actively trying to fill posts, there are acknowledged areas of significant nurse staffing shortage affecting patient care and treatment, particularly on the medical care wards and in community in-patient services and specialist palliative care.

The right hon. Lady may not appreciate hearing this, but the fact remains that responsibility for staffing in hospitals in her constituency sits squarely with the board of the Mid Yorkshire trust. Trusts have a duty to ensure they have the numbers and skill mix needed to deliver quality care, patient safety and efficiency, taking into account local factors such as acuity and case mix.

Yvette Cooper: But what if there just are not enough A and E doctors or neurology doctors to fill the posts? If they advertise them, charge around the country recruiting for them and they still cannot get the doctors in, what are they supposed to do?

Mr Dunne: I will come on to what we are doing nationally to try to make sure we have an adequate number of trained professional clinicians to meet the needs around the country.

It is important to recognise that while nationally some standards are set for safe staffing ratios, which were referred to by the hon. Member for Dewsbury, these are not a hard-and-fast rule and never have been. They are guidance rather than statutory requirements, and this position has not changed. Trusts have to use their judgment and focus on quality of care, patient safety and efficiency, taking into account local factors such as case mix rather than just numbers and staffing ratios. It is not a case of meeting a particular staffing ratio or getting to a particular figure and thinking that the matter is resolved. There must be enough staff—as both hon. Members are saying—to meet the needs of the patients, and it is a matter for the clinicians on the spot to make a judgment on that.

Nationally, demands on our staff across the NHS are rising, and more patients are being cared for than ever before. That is as true of Mid Yorkshire as it is of anywhere else in the NHS. Last year, across the Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust, 232,966 patients were seen, compared with 194,119 in 2009-2010. That is an increase of more than 15% over the past six years. There were also some 4,685 more diagnostic tests carried out in May this year than in May 2010. Activity levels are therefore rising considerably.

Paula Sherriff: I thank the Minister for his constructive tone in responding to the debate. Does he acknowledge that the significant increase in the tendencies is partly down to a crisis in primary care in the area? That sector is struggling to attract GPs and practice nurses, and people are therefore sometimes attending A&E inappropriately, instead of being seen in primary care.

Mr Dunne: It is well recognised across the country that the tendencies in A&E include a significant proportion of people who should not be there and who should be being dealt with elsewhere in the system. The reasons for that are legion; it is not all down to pressures on GPs. Much of it is down to members of the public increasingly seeing their hospital as the place to go. We have a big educational job to do across the country on that, and it behoves all of us to help to relieve the pressure on A&E by encouraging patient to get their health needs seen to in the most appropriate place, whether through a pharmacy or a GP, or through other community services.
I want to touch on the question of funding. It is not all about money, but money plays a part. As a result of the funding settlement that we have secured for NHS England, the Wakefield clinical commissioning group will receive £488.8 million in 2016-17—the current fiscal year—which represents a cash increase of just over 3% compared with the previous year. In cash terms, that is a £21.7 million increase—a significant increase compared with previous years. For North Kirklee, the other CCG that commissions the work of the trust, there was also an increase in the current year to £237.1 million, representing a 2.49% increase compared with 2015-16, or just a shade under £12 million. That increase is substantially greater than the deficit reported by the Mid Yorkshire trust for last year. Of course, the commissioning funds do not all go to the trust, but the health economy in the area has received a significant cash injection.

Ensuring that we have the right number of nurses—I shall start with nurses—is a vital move towards achieving the Government's objective of having a fully seven-day NHS by 2020. Nationally, we already have 11,800 more nurses, midwives and health visitors than we did in May 2010. The number of nurse training places has increased by 14% over the past three years alone, with further increases planned in the current year. More than 50,000 nurses are currently in professional training, which includes working and learning in hospitals through placements. However, the current funding system means that two out of every three people who apply to a university to do a nursing degree are not accepted for training. That is one of several reasons why trusts such as Mid Yorkshire find it difficult to recruit.

In 2014, the last full year for which I have statistics, universities were forced to turn down 37,000 nursing applicants. As a result, the NHS suffers from a limited supply of nurses and must rely on expensive agency staff and overseas workers, as referred to earlier. That is one reason why, earlier today, the Government announced their response to the public consultation on plans to place trainee nurses in the same system as all other staff and overseas workers, as referred to earlier. The right hon. Lady is quite aware, and that is currently under consultation.

Mr Dunne: The short answer is yes. I intend to honour a commitment to meet the local trust—I would be happy to facilitate a meeting for the local MPs as well—to talk about the reconfiguration plans that are afoot.

I am conscious that I am in the unusual position of winding up an Adjournment debate at this stage of the parliamentary calendar and in danger of running out of time, so I will turn to the reconfiguration plans before I conclude.

We have to look at staffing issues, wherever they are, and at all the nursing specialisations in the hospital that were referred to earlier in the context of the wider reconfiguration of services currently going on within the trust and the sustainability transformation plans within the region later this year. The reconfiguration is driven by the need to address long-term systemic problems, some of which I touched on earlier. The current service changes were agreed back in 2013 and were supported by the Secretary of State in 2014 following the advice of the Independent Reconfiguration Panel.

Implementation of the agreed service changes at the trust is a matter for the local NHS, which is undertaking detailed work to assess fully the benefits and risks of bringing the changes forward. The process will look primarily at safety and quality, as well as capacity across the system, and will take local stakeholder views into account. Local commissioners will make the decisions about precisely what is to happen, and it is for the local NHS to keep all service change under review in line with its role in ensuring that the services provided are high quality, safe and sustainable. Staffing levels at the trust, particularly in nursing, remain a concern, and are regularly identified by the trust's regulators and commissioners.

The trust has taken some action to address those concerns, including recruitment of additional nurses and non-qualified support staff as well as strengthening safe staffing policies and increasing board level scrutiny. Clearly, that has not solved the problem, as we have heard so graphically this evening, and more needs to be done.

The trust believes that benefits could be realised in bringing forward implementation of the service changes with improved clinical safety, efficiency and patient flow. I am aware that concerns are being expressed about the knock-on effects of the proposal for changes nearby in Calderdale, of which the hon. Ladies will be aware, and that is currently under consultation.

Change at each of these trusts should not be looked at in isolation, particularly in an area such as this with so many interdependencies and challenging geography and local public transport. Following the meeting of my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), with the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) and the late hon. Member for Batley and Spen, I urge him to look at whether there could be a Yorkshire action plan on recruitment. We have a regional problem that is worse than the national problem—although it will be replicated in other regions.

Mr Dunne: I will come to how we will respond when I conclude my remarks, but the right hon. Lady is quite right to point out that the problem is not unique to this particular trust and must be seen in a regional context.

Paula Sherriff: I also thank the Minister for his generosity. I just want him to know that the public meeting unfortunately did not go ahead owing to the tragic death of our colleague from Batley and Spen. However, given the staffing crisis and the fact that Mid Yorkshire is still undergoing a significant downsizing programme that will see Dewsbury hospital reduced to a minor injuries unit and many patients having to go to Pinderfields Hospital in Wakefield, will the Minister please reconsider the plans?
and Spen (Jo Cox) earlier this year, he agreed to facilitate a meeting in September with the regulators—NHS Improvement, the CQC and the NHS providers and commissioners. I will undertake to ensure that that meeting goes ahead.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.30 pm

*House adjourned.*
School Penalty Fines and Authorised Absence

4.30 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered e-petition 129698 relating to school penalty fines and authorised absence from school.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and a privilege again to have the opportunity to debate this subject, which looks like it is simply not going to go away. It is evident that parents from all around the country feel strongly, which is why we get to debate it again. We are here as a result of the online petition titled, “No more school penalty fines and bring back the 10 day authorised absence”, which has received more than 200,000 signatures to date. I am sure that we are all clear on the background, but let me put on the record that the petition states:

“Back in 2013 the government changed the law on taking your children out of school in term time so that now you receive a penalty fine of £60 per child”,

which can increase if the fine is not paid within a certain time.

Before the change in the law, which was passed by way of a statutory instrument and without the impact assessments being considered, headteachers had the discretion to allow up to 10 days off for pupils in special circumstances. That approach was rooted in common sense: teachers know the pupils, know the families they come from and know the communities that they are a part of. Sadly, we now have a Big Brother blanket ban on all family holidays in term time that gives the message that the state knows better than parents what is right for their children.

As we know, the rule was turned on its head by a recent court ruling, which judged that it was unlawful to fine parents for taking their children out of school when their children are regularly attending school. Confusion now reigns. We recently heard from Devon County Council that, until the details of the new law are made clear, it has suspended issuing any new penalty notices and cases to be heard in court will be adjourned. Cornwall Council has apparently been accused of going soft on fining parents. Although I welcome the decisions, headteachers had the discretion to allow up to 10 days off for pupils in special circumstances. That approach was rooted in common sense: teachers know the pupils, know the families they come from and know the communities that they are a part of. Sadly, we now have a Big Brother blanket ban on all family holidays in term time that gives the message that the state knows better than parents what is right for their children.

Mr Russell Hobby, the general secretary of the school leaders' union, the National Association of Headteachers, stated that, as we approach the holiday season, the recent ruling had “created confusion for schools and parents” and that “the system of fines is clearly too blunt an instrument and in many cases it drives a wedge between schools and families.”

Swift action is needed to clarify the position for families, schools and all concerned.

The Minister knows that I care deeply about this—we have discussed and debated it before—partly because of the negative effect on the people of my constituency in Cornwall. I have made that case and spoken about the impact on the tourist industry many times before. I do not intend to repeat those arguments, but I want to address what I believe are some of the key arguments and some of the points that parents up and down the country feel very strongly about. I believe that we need to return to a policy that brings back common sense and a degree of flexibility.

I believe that the policy devalues the place of the family. The Government do not know what is best for my or anyone else's children. Every child is unique and every family is different. This one-size-fits-all blanket ban does not allow for the uniqueness of every child and every family. It is not the Government's role to tell parents what is best for their children.

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): Does my hon. Friend accept that it is the Government's role to say that education should be compulsory from the age of five to 16?

Steve Double: I thank the Minister for that intervention. Of course I agree with him that we value compulsory education in this country and that it has a very important part to play. However, compulsory education does not happen only in the classroom—it does not mean that children should be stopped from taking a family holiday, which, I would argue, has an equally important role in their upbringing.

One parent who was fined for taking his child to a sporting world championship that a family member was competing in wrote these words to me:

“The notion that a state official can criminally enforce their perspective on which family members are important to a child is very disturbing coming from a democratic government… By focusing on what is an ‘exceptional circumstance’, and trying to eliminate cheap holidays, the law has sent schools down the path of criminally enforcing ethics, family values, the intimate details of children's lives and relationships, without any qualifications or regard for academics, the wellbeing of the child, or the integrity and dignity of the family structure.”

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman is doing an excellent job in leading this debate. Does he agree that the policy is far too draconian? I have two young children and the headteacher at their school is excellent and sensible, but that is not always the case. Should parents not be given more credibility in terms of being able to make the right decision for their children?

Steve Double: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The one-size-fits-all blanket approach is draconian, and often penalises the wrong people and leaves no grounds for the school and headteachers to decide what is best for the individual child.

Just last week I spoke to a primary school headteacher in my constituency and was surprised by what he said:

“The best thing that could happen to some of the children in my school would be for their parents to take them” on a week's holiday “even in term time”. That was a headteacher who knows the children at his school, knows the families and the pressures and challenges they face, and knows the community that they are a part of. It is clear that the state does not know better than families what is best for their children.

Mr Hanson: My hon. Friend has been extremely generous in giving way. I am grateful for the detailed example he gave us of the situation in Cornwall. I think that the onus is on the Department to determine whether it is right to have a blanket ban that prevents children from taking part in family holidays that are essential to their emotional development.

The Minister for Schools: I assure my hon. Friend that I will bring this point to the Department of Education. I had a chance to discuss it with my hon. Friend Mr Brazier recently. We have heard about the impact on the tourism industry; I think it is right that the question of family holidays is considered in light of that.

Mr Hanson: My hon. Friend is right. I am grateful to him for his support.

The Minister for Schools: I have an assurance from the Department that the House will be kept informed on this matter. In the meantime, however, my hon. Friend is right that we do not want to give headteachers the impression that the law as it stands is the settled position.
part of. I challenge the Minister: does he agree with that headteacher? Is there ever a case, a situation or a set of circumstances where the best thing for a child would be to miss a week of school in order to have a holiday with their parents?

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I am trying to understand the hon. Gentleman’s arguments and ask for clarification. Is he suggesting that parents should have an absolute right to take their children out for up to 10 days without any reference to the advice of the headteacher, or is he saying that the headteacher or another member of staff should be able to exercise a view on whether that request is authorised?

Steve Double: I will come to that later, but I make the point now that, of course, we are not talking about a free-for-all where parents can just take their children out whenever they like. I am arguing that we should give the discretion back to headteachers, with a degree of flexibility, so that they can decide what is right for each child in each unique set of circumstances and in each family situation, and, taking all matters into consideration, decide what is best for that child, rather than have a blanket ban.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a very persuasive case and is concentrating in particular on the family holiday entitlement, but can I bring him to another area? What about when parents have to take children out in exceptional circumstances? There is an absolute lack of clarity about what constitutes exceptional circumstances and there is no consistency. Does he agree that there need to be national guidelines to determine what exceptional circumstances are?

Steve Double: I suspect the Minister will say that guidelines have been provided, but in my experience, most headteachers say that, even when they follow the guidelines and exercise their discretion in saying what exceptional circumstances apply, they get criticised for exercising it when there is an Ofsted inspection. There seems to be a lack of consistency, which is why I argue for putting the discretion back in the hands of headteachers. Give them the freedom—they know the pupils and the families, so let them decide what is best for their pupils.

The Government have made great claims about the importance of the family and the value of a strong stable family to a child’s life and, indeed, to the wider community. I wholeheartedly support that, but it is sad that the family test was not in place when the rule was introduced in 2013. If it were, what would the outcome have been? I take the view that the family test would help headteachers, with a degree of flexibility, so that they can decide what is right for each child in each unique set of circumstances and in each family situation, and, taking all matters into consideration, decide what is best for that child, rather than have a blanket ban.

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The simple fact is that, for many families, the choice is either a holiday during term time or no family holiday at all. For some people, that is due to their work situation—it is just not possible for many parents to take time off during school holidays. That is particularly true in my constituency, where people work in the tourist industry, but it is also true for many public sector workers in the NHS, the police and other sectors. For other families, it is simply a case of economics. A holiday during the peak season can be two or three times the price of a holiday during term time. For many families, it is just not affordable to take a holiday in the peak season. The Family Holiday Association reports that about 7 million families in the UK are simply unable to afford a week’s holiday.

It is easy for MPs, Government Ministers and education officers, who earn more than five times the salary of the average person in my constituency and, indeed, people in many other parts of the country, to say that people should only take a holiday out of term time. As someone suggested to me recently, the problem does not affect those in private education, as private schools have longer school holidays anyway. I am sorry to say that the situation simply shows that we do not understand the reality of life for many families. It is not a case of just looking for a cheap holiday. For many families, it is the only holiday they can afford, so it is a matter of a term-time holiday or no holiday.

We are discriminating against those on low incomes by saying that if they cannot afford the high prices charged during the school holidays, they do not deserve a family holiday. The policy is making the situation worse. By focusing all demand on the few weeks of school holidays, the rules of supply and demand mean that the prices go up during those weeks, and the drop in demand during term times means that the prices go down in those weeks. The differential between a term-time week and a school holiday week is widening. The message from the Government to our children is quite simple—that time in the classroom is more important than time away with their parents. Quite frankly, that is wrong.

My second point is that the policy denies the value of a holiday to a child’s development and education. Education does not take place only in the classroom. Although no one would deny the importance of children learning maths, English and the other core subjects, we should also accept that there are other equally important aspects of any child’s education. Education should be about preparing our children for life, work, being a good citizen and playing their part in the world. It is not just about passing exams. The opportunity to travel—to other countries or to other parts of this country—can and does play a valuable part in any child’s upbringing.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman’s case. A lot of my constituents—families with grandparents outside the UK in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh—will be encouraged by what he is saying. However, he seems to envisage a difficulty role being placed on headteachers. Is he suggesting that any family could take their child out of school for a week or a couple of weeks if that works for them? Should there not be some encouragement for families to keep their children in school if that is at all possible?

Steve Double: Clearly we do not want a free-for-all. I am arguing for discretion to be put back into the hands of headteachers, which was the case before the rule was introduced in 2013. To my observation—I have been a
school governor for nearly 20 years—it was working perfectly well. Even in a place such as Cornwall, where there was high demand for taking children away in term-time because parents worked in the tourist sector, there was still conversation and co-operation between the parent and the school. It was not a free-for-all. There was co-operation between parents and schools, and I am asking for the same now.

As the NAHT says, we are driving a wedge between the family and the school, which is damaging to, rather than supportive and encouraging of, children’s education. We are creating tensions between the school and the family, which has to be detrimental to the child’s education.

**Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): I have a constituency case in which a mother and the child’s father, from whom the mother had separated, were fined. The mother’s husband was also fined but he has no parental control at all. In that case, three people were fined. Does the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) agree that there is a fundamental lack of transparency, fairness and consistency in how the fines are being applied, and that headteacher involvement would start to address some of those ridiculous situations?

**Steve Double**: The hon. Lady makes a good point. One problem with the policy is that it is being applied inconsistently by different local authorities. Since I stuck my head above the parapet on the issue, hundreds of parents have contacted me with many different stories about how the policy is being applied. The case mentioned by the hon. Lady is a good example of inconsistency, as three parents have been fined for the same child. Greater clarity is needed. I agree that the answer is to give discretion back to headteachers and let them make the decision.

Many headteachers up and down the country are asking for their discretion back because they understand the tensions that the policy causes between schools and families. One of the most important things in a child’s education is that their parents are engaged with their education, which means having a good positive relationship with the school. That is far more important than what school a child attends or even how many days they are with the school. That is far more important than what education, which means having a good positive relationship

**Rosie Cooper**: I have a letter from the Minister—I took the matter up with the county council, as the education authority—who says:

“Individual local authorities determine the circumstances in which parents can be fined”.

But staff at the local authority tell me that they have no involvement, that schools only apply the fines and that the Government set the policy. We really are in a mess and we need greater clarity to even begin to understand how the system is working.

**Steve Double**: Again the hon. Lady makes a good point, and the case that I have come across is that I have tried to follow the chain of responsibility. I have met with headteachers, Ofsted and local authority leaders, and there is a lack of clarity about who is responsible—it is a vicious circle. Sadly, that comes down to the ruling and the situation with the Department for Education, which made the blanket ban, and that is the very point that I am challenging.

The policy undermines the place of family and devalues the importance of family holidays in any child’s upbringing. The policy does not enjoy broad support: parents hate it; many headteachers I talk to dislike it hugely and want it to be changed; and even the Local Government Association does not support it. David Simmonds from the LGA said:

“The increase in fines reflected tighter enforcement by schools that are under pressure from Ofsted to meet attendance targets, as well as a rising school population”.

He called for more flexibility in the rules to allow heads to take account of family circumstances where absence is unavoidable. He said that heads should be trusted to make decisions about a child’s absence from school without being forced to issue fines and start prosecutions in situations where they believe the absence is reasonable.”

That is a common-sense approach.

I am sure that we all want a good education for all children in this country, but that is not what we are debating. The Government are trying to reduce truancy, which is a persistent problem for a very small number of students, but this blanket approach is not the way to achieve that; it is a blunt instrument hitting the wrong people. There is a big difference between truancy and parents who simply want to be able to spend a holiday with their children. It should be noted that children who are persistently absent are less likely than other children to go on a family holiday. Before the regulations were introduced, authorised family holidays accounted for 7.5% of all absences from primary schools, dropping to 2.5% of all absences from secondary schools, but absence for family holidays was lower, at 1.9%, for persistently absent pupils, compared with 8.2% for other pupils. The policy is focusing on the wrong families; it is hitting the wrong people.

**Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): Given that holidays outside term time are much more expensive, does my hon. Friend accept that children who are restricted from taking time to go on holiday, which can be educational and enriching, tend to be socially deprived and from impoverished backgrounds? We are limiting their life chances with this policy.

**Steve Double**: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We are hitting the wrong people with this policy. The children of families who, because of the economics and the price, can afford to take them on holiday only during term time are possibly the ones who need such holidays the most in order to enrich their experience of the world, to strengthen their family relationships and to expand their knowledge and appreciation of the world, but they are the ones who are being excluded from such highly valuable experiences by this policy.

By stating that a family holiday is not a valid reason for an authorised absence from school, we are not addressing the real issue of persistent truancy. The assumption that absence is the main cause of falling attainment is just that—an assumption that has no evidence to support it. Stephen Gorard, professor of education at Durham University, has said:

“There is an association between the proportion of absence and the aggregate level of attainment of students who’ve had that level of absence but it would be wrong to assume that it was necessarily causal. We don’t know that the absences are the reason...
for the lower attainment. They could both be indicators of something else such as background characteristics and of course it’s also possible that children who aren’t doing well at school after a time begin to drift away and perhaps take time off. It could be that the causal mechanism is the other way around.”

This policy cannot be considered in isolation. We cannot just take a narrow approach that says, “This is the way to ensure that children attend school regularly,” without considering the wider impact on other aspects of family life and society.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for pursuing this good cause. Does he agree that the policy has an adverse impact on NHS services? The population of areas such as Cornwall increases significantly during the summer holiday months, which places extra pressure on health services at the very time when medical staff are forced to take their holiday.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point on an issue I am only too aware of. In Cornwall, and I suspect in other parts of the country, families are forced to take their holiday just at the time when we need more NHS staff. Hospitals and other services struggle to maintain staffing levels for that very reason.

The Government need to take a joined-up approach and consider the impact not only on the Department for Education but on other organisations, such as the NHS.

We are still waiting for the Government’s response to the recent court ruling, and it would be helpful if the Minister could provide an update today. If, as he has previously stated, his intention is to reinforce the rule, can he confirm that that will require primary legislation, as the court indicated? If so, will he confirm that the process will include a full impact assessment of both the economic and the social impacts and that the family test will be rigorously applied? Will he confirm that he will consult widely not only with schools but with family groups and the tourism industry?

Along with families across the country, I hope that the Minister will now choose a different response. The petition calls for 10 days of authorised leave each year for a family holiday, but I am not sure whether that is necessarily the correct approach. The right approach is to return the decision to the discretion of headteachers, who should be allowed to make the decision based on their knowledge of the children and families involved.

Headteachers should be given the flexibility to decide, in co-operation with parents, what is right and best for the children in their school. Once again, I ask the Minister to reconsider the Government’s position on this issue, to recognise the very real concerns of parents and to accept that this policy was rushed through without the consultation and assessment that it should have had. Take this opportunity, in light of the recent court ruling, to think again. Accept that truancy and persistent absence are different from a family holiday. Repeal this ruling and return flexibility and common sense. Allow families who want nothing more than to spend a week on holiday with their children the right to do so without the fear of being made into criminals.

4.57 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing this important debate. We are both south-west MPs, and this issue has particular resonance and significance in a region where tourism is an incredibly important part of the economy. I thank the Minister for being here and for meeting me to discuss a particular case. The meeting was useful, and I will mention more details of the case in a moment. I know he is listening, and I know he is open to some of our suggestions.

I am sure I speak for my hon. Friend for St Austell and Newquay when I say that we seek to be helpful. We are not seeking to cause problems, to rebel for the sake of it or to make a nuisance. All south-west MPs and Members from all areas of the country are being contacted by many thousands of worried parents and headteachers about their real concerns with the current position, and it is incumbent on us to inform the Minister and the Government of those concerns. I do not seek to create difficulty; I merely seek to raise an issue that many of my constituents, and I am sure many constituents of right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House, have raised.

Lilian Greenwood: I have a great deal of sympathy with some of the hon. Gentleman’s points, but will he concede that headteachers are also expressing concern that the current uncertainty, as well as the change requested by the petition, could make it more difficult for them to encourage good attendance, which they believe is important for the good achievement and progress of their pupils?

Peter Heaton-Jones: I will discuss the specifics of the petition in a moment, but as I said in my opening remarks, it is not just parents but headteachers who are contacting us to express concerns about the status quo.

It is important to point out that nobody here, including my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay, is arguing that education should not be compulsory. Of course it should. Nobody is arguing, either, that parents should have an automatic right to decide that they want to take their children out of school for a set number of days a year.

That goes exactly to the point made by the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), Like my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay, I do not agree with the headline of the petition, which mentions bringing back the 10 days of authorised absence. We could argue for some time about whether it ever existed in the first place, but I do not support that idea. I do not believe that parents should expect an automatic right to a certain number of absence days a year, or that a headteacher should expect to approve them. I want common sense. I want the responsibility to go back to individual headteachers and individual parents, so that they decide what is right for individual children in individual cases. I keep using the word “individual” deliberately, because we cannot have a one-size-fits-all policy that seeks to impose a centrally decided rule on all children in all circumstances.

We need the common sense of individual discretion back in the system.

Michelle Donelan: Does my hon. Friend accept that the policy must be applied on a case-by-case basis, and that more trust in and respect for our teachers and
parents is necessary? If requests were considered case by case, headteachers could consider the age and stage of the child, their needs and their other absences throughout the year.

Peter Heaton-Jones: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I do not know whether she saw my remarks in advance, but I was coming on to say that what I want is a world where we recognise that the best people to make decisions for children in individual cases are their parents and their headteacher. Those are the people who should be making such decisions, and they need the discretion to do so.

Now, however, everyone is confused by the vacuum created following the Isle of Wight court case. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay suggested, we need some certainty from the Minister—I am sure that he will be able to provide it—about the Government’s position on the court case, which has left people concerned. In particular, the fear among headteachers to whom I have spoken is that under the existing regulations, if they authorise absences from their school, they will be penalised when Ofsted comes and looks at their absence statistics. Headteachers are rightly worried about the implications of that for the rest of their school.

We need a clear indication from the Minister that when headteachers decide that they wish to authorise an absence in individual circumstances, Ofsted will not count it against the absence figures for their school as a whole. Headteachers need the certainty that if they feel it is right to make a particular decision in the case of a particular child, they can do so without being penalised from above.

My hon. Friend. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay mentioned the situation in Devon. Due to the uncertainty brought on by the Isle of Wight case, Devon County Council has now suspended all actions against parents, some of whom have been summoned to court or made a first appearance before magistrates. That is absolutely the right thing to do in the circumstances, but I am afraid it merely adds to the sense of confusion.

One case that hon. Members may have seen reported widely in the national media at about the same time as the Isle of Wight case was that of my constituents Edward and Hazel Short. Mr and Mrs Short have two daughters, Nicole and Lauren, aged 16 and 15 respectively. Nicole and Lauren have represented England at volleyball. They are budding national athletes. This piece of paper in front of me—which is from the Daily Mirror, just to prove that there is absolutely no political bias in my choice of media—describes Nicole and Lauren as “being hailed as stars of the future.”

This is their story: Nicole and Lauren were invited on a three-week training session. Two of the weeks coincided with school term time, and six and a half days’ absence from school would have been required. Their headteacher decided that he was not in a position to authorise their absence, and a fixed penalty notice of £60 was issued. Mr and Mrs Short decided not to pay it, and the next thing they knew, Devon County Council summoned them to appear in court. They appeared before north Devon magistrates. They still did not accept the fine, and said that they would fight their case all the way.

Devin County Council then summoned Mr and Mrs Short further to appear in court this month. When the finding in the Isle of Wight case went against the Government, as my hon. Friend said, Devon County Council decided that Mr and Mrs Short’s case, and a number of others with which it was currently dealing in the same way, would be suspended and no further action would be taken.

Lilian Greenwood: My understanding is that headteachers have the authority to allow a request for leave during term time in exceptional circumstances. Is the hon. Gentleman aware of why the headteacher, knowing that those young people had the potential to represent their country, did not consider the circumstances exceptional?

Peter Heaton-Jones: It is a perfectly reasonable question. I tried to answer it in advance by saying that there is always a concern about what Ofsted’s view will be when it considers absences on the school roll across the board. All headteachers are extremely concerned that if they authorise such an absence, it will count against them when their overall absence statistics are considered.

Let me be clear: I have no criticism whatever of the school or the headteacher for the decision that they made. They felt that they had no choice but to do so; that is the point. The issue of choice is fundamental. Parents and headteachers should, in exceptional circumstances, have the freedom and choice to allow absence. That is what they are currently being denied, and in my view that cannot be right.

I raise that case in particular not only because it is in my constituency but because it specifically did not involve giving the children a holiday; that was not the purpose of the absence request. Yet it is absolutely the case that in Devon, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay and many other constituencies, the tourism sector plays a vital role in the local economy, and it is being badly affected by the current situation. By some measures, one in six jobs in my constituency depend either directly or indirectly on the tourism sector. It is a vital driver of the local economy, and many families in my constituency work in it.

Not only does the current situation create the problem that many families are unable to take advantage of cheaper holidays during term time, but for the many hundreds—indeed, probably thousands—of families who work in the tourism sector in my constituency, there is no way that they can go away during the school holidays. That is the time when they run their family businesses, so they are impeded in their ability to take their children away. I am afraid that by not helping them do so, we are not helping the holiday business.

I have read the transcript of a previous discussion in the main Chamber between my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay and the Minister. The point was made that we need the Government to think carefully about changing the regulations, due to their effect on the tourism industry. I hope the Minister will not mind my quoting him. He said:

“I do not believe that we should be returning to the Dickensian world where the needs of industry and commerce take precedence over the education of children.”
No one is suggesting that. No one is suggesting that children should be allowed to be taken away from school to satisfy the wishes of a few small businesses. This is a bigger issue than that. In the same discussion, he also said:

“I doubt that the Cornish tourism industry will be best pleased by his”—

my hon. Friend’s—

“assertion that tourism in Cornwall is dependent on truanting children for its survival.”—[Official Report, 19 May 2016; Vol. 611, c. 139-40.]

The Cornish tourism industry is not, and I am delighted to say that the Devon tourism industry is not. In particular, the north Devon tourism industry is not; that is the best place to spend a holiday.

The point is that we are talking not about truanting children but about the right of parents and teachers to agree, in a few cases, that it is appropriate in the circumstances for children to be taken out of school for a family holiday if they might otherwise miss out on one. That is the point. Families and children are missing out on a family holiday through no fault of their own and face the risk of being dragged before the courts or fined substantial amounts of money. Headteachers feel that they are having taken away from them the right to make individual decisions in individual circumstances.

Perhaps another result of this debate will be that holiday companies, airlines and those that offer package holidays take a long hard look at themselves. They should not be charging such vastly inflated prices during school holidays. I shall cite one example, which I raised the last time we debated this subject. I think you were in the Chair for at least some of that sitting, Mr Hanson; forgive me for outlining this particular circumstance again, but it tells the story rather well. A package holiday to Spain for a family of two adults and two children beginning on 14 July would have cost £2,000. A package holiday to Spain for a family of two adults and two children beginning on 14 July would have cost £2,000. The same holiday, with identical flights and accommodation, beginning just two weeks later when the school holidays had begun, would have cost £1,300. That is a 60% mark-up. It would not be allowed in any other retail business, and we should not put up with it.

It is not just the Government who I ask, respectfully, to think again about where we are; the holiday industry should not be charging such vastly inflated prices during the school holidays, so they have to request to take their children out of school, otherwise they will not be able to enjoy a holiday.

It is absolutely right that the Government have a duty to ensure that children have full academic attendance and a full school record. I am not arguing with that, but there must be some carrot and some stick. My fear is that, with the 2013 guidelines, the balance has shifted rather too much towards the stick approach, which I do not think is valuable or helpful.

Let me go off script for a moment. I am a bit of an old-fashioned Tory sort of boy, and I like less government. I like smaller government. I like government that does not just sit in Westminster bringing a clunking fist down rather hard on parents, families and working people who are just trying to do the right thing. I have an uneasy sense that the current regulation and policy are on the wrong side of that. I passionately believe that, as a Conservative Government, we should be helping hard-working people who occasionally have no choice but to take their children out of school. As in the case of my constituents, Mr and Mrs Short, they might do so not for a holiday but for a perfectly reasonable sporting endeavour. I am not sure how we have reached the point where, as a Government, we are saying, “We, centrally, know better than you.”

Mr Gibb: This debate boils down to two phrases: “in special circumstances” and “in exceptional circumstances”. It is about the difference between the words “special” and “exceptional”, so the way my hon. Friend is describing matters exaggerates the issue. Even he believes that headteachers should grant term-time holidays not in all circumstances but in special circumstances. The Government believe that they should be granted only in exceptional circumstances.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I thank the Minister for his views. I shall simply say this: at the moment, we are in a mess. Teachers, headteachers, schools and parents do not know where they stand. I take his point, which is perfectly reasonable. I do not agree that I am exaggerating the situation, though, because I have been on the receiving end—as I am sure other hon. Members have—of hundreds of emails, letters and phone calls from parents and headteachers who are deeply worried about the position in which they now find themselves. That is not an exaggeration.

Imran Hussain: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when a family go to Pakistan to visit family members and there is an unexpected death in the family in Pakistan, that is an exceptional circumstance? That family were fined on their return. If that is not an exceptional circumstance, what is?

Peter Heaton-Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The Minister said that this debate boils down to the definition of “exceptional circumstances”; under any definition, what the hon. Gentleman has just described would be exceptional.

It is absolutely right that the Government have a duty to ensure that parents send their children to school and that children have a full academic record, but my fear is that the 2013 guidelines put us in a field of unintended consequences. They are having a serious effect on many
families in my constituency and further afield whose only crime is to want to take a holiday when they can, or to take their children away based on some other perfectly reasonable grounds or exceptional circumstances. The guidance is well intended, but I fear that, in the lack of flexibility that is being applied to its interpretation in some quarters, it is having unintended consequences. Otherwise innocent parents, who simply want the best for their children and are the right people to know what is best for them, are being criminalised. I hope I can work with the Minister, co-operatively, to put things right.

5.17 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I shall make just a couple of brief remarks. First, I should say that I have not been contacted by individual parents wanting to express concerns, although I note that hundreds of them have signed the petition. I have a great deal of sympathy with parents, particularly those on low incomes, who want to give their children the opportunity to go on holiday and cannot afford to do so during peak periods when, as has been stated, the costs of some holidays are exceptionally high. I have, though, been contacted by the portfolio holder for schools at Nottingham City Council, and I have discussed the matter with a headteacher at one of my local schools. It is important to bring their representations to the Minister, even though I fear that many of my constituents will not thank me for doing so.

I understand that good attendance is vital to good educational attainment, which Nottingham City Council has been working hard to improve. The Minister will be aware that our city needs to make improvements and is very committed to doing so. The local authority has been working very hard to improve school attendance, which has involved fining parents for unauthorised absences when they take their children out of school without permission. I know that many parents will see that as very harsh and as a large stick; I myself do not like the idea that parents face fines. However, I understand the need to encourage parents to realise that getting their children to school on a regular basis, so that they do not miss time in the classroom, is exceedingly important.

The judgment in the Isle of Wight case has created huge uncertainty. Perhaps the most important issue for local authorities and headteachers is to have a degree of certainty and I hope that the Minister can tell us what he intends to do to provide it.

Sam Webster, who is the portfolio holder for education, employment and skills at Nottingham City Council and therefore responsible for schools, has said that it is “worth noting that 90% attendance”—which is the attendance rate in some of our schools—“is not good and is the equivalent of a child having a day off every 2 weeks.”

I think that those of us who are parents appreciate that if our child had a day off school every two weeks, that would have an impact on their educational attainment, no matter how valuable the experience that they may be having in their time off school.

Last year, Nottingham City Council was the most improved local authority in terms of school attendance and I hope that the Minister welcomes that. However, the current uncertainty could see the good progress that has been made being lost. Councillor Webster’s call is “for Government to act urgently to give greater clarity and ideally bring forward a change to the wording of the legislation.” I hope that when the Minister sums up, he will respond to that concern, which has been raised by the portfolio holder responsible for schools in Nottingham.

The second point I will make was initially made to me by Giles Civil, the headteacher at Highbank Primary and Nursery School in Clifton, which is in my constituency. Giles has been the headteacher there for a couple of years now. It is a challenging school, which did not have great standards before his arrival and consequently progress has been challenging. Nevertheless, the school, which has fewer than 300 pupils, has managed to raise pupil attendance from 92%, the rate when Giles arrived there two years ago, to 94.8% last year. Obviously, there is still significant room for progress. Giles said to me that “A school year is 190 days”, but he also pointed out that for his school: “total unauthorised absence for this year…is 939 days.”

As he explained, that is the equivalent of “4.9 school years.”

Giles feels that it is a real slog to raise achievement and that school attendance is absolutely vital. However, he also feels that the change has taken away his stick, if you like, and that it is important there is clarity on this issue, because he wants to raise attendance at his school and he is working in a number of ways to do so. Therefore, it is necessary to get some clarity from the Government.

As I say, I do not like the idea that parents are being fined, and the opportunity to take children away on holiday is really vital. I hope that the Government can consider how they can make holidays more affordable for parents and I also hope that the holiday industry will listen, as the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) said, and consider the impact that the current situation is having. Nevertheless, attendance is important and headteachers and local education authorities obviously need to be given clarity and some power or some guidance that allows them to improve attendance, as the current situation has created unnecessary uncertainty.

5.23 pm

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): This is the first time that I have served under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and it is a pleasure to do so.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for securing this debate. As you know, Mr Hanson, the debate arises from an e-petition about fining parents who take children on holiday during term time that was signed by almost 200,000 people. One person keenly involved in this debate is my constituent, Mr Jonathan Platt. He is currently being taken to the Supreme Court for refusing to pay a fine because he took his daughter on holiday. This situation troubles me considerably. Even after taking the holiday in question into account, Mr Platt’s daughter’s attendance was good and because of that the Isle of Wight’s magistrates court decided that there was no case to answer.
Mr Gibb: Could my hon. Friend define what he means by “good” in that circumstance, and will he confirm that it is the level that the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) referred to as one day a fortnight?

Mr Turner: No. Mr Platt used the term “good” to describe his child attending school all-year round except for a fortnight, which is not the same as one day a fortnight, and there was no evidence from any quarter to question that description.

Isle of Wight Council wanted a different interpretation of the law and so it took Mr Platt’s case to the High Court. The High Court found that it was not acceptable for the authority “to criminalise every unauthorised holiday by the simple device of alleging…that there has been no regular attendance in a period limited to the absence on holiday.”

The judgment said that regular attendance must be measured over a longer period of time, and Mr Platt’s daughter’s attendance record was satisfactory in that respect.

The High Court’s judgment did not find favour with either Isle of Wight Council or the Department for Education. The Department has now provided the council with funding and legal support to take the case to the Supreme Court. Mr Platt is being given no such help; he is fighting this battle using private resources and not public money. The state is throwing the book at him for daring to stand up to the authorities and being found right—not once, but twice. So this is a real David and Goliath situation.

I am a former teacher and both my parents were teachers, too, so I understand the importance and value of education. I have experienced at first hand the difficulties of teaching a class where not all the children are in the classroom full-time. However, I have also seen the immense value of family holidays, in educational and other terms.

I have listened to the Government’s argument about the relationship between attendance and attainment. It exists, but it is not a simple picture. As the latest research from the Department itself says:

“There are a range of pupil, school, parental and societal characteristics that are likely to affect attainment in varying degrees.”

It is the interplay of factors that cannot be judged in Whitehall. Schools can collaborate with parents to ensure that a child’s education will be enriched by a family holiday and of course the child can be set work to be completed while they are away.

However, if the headteacher cannot justify that the holiday is being taken in “exceptional circumstances”, then parents can be criminalised under legislation introduced by statutory instrument in 2013. For many years, parents have been legally responsible for their child’s regular attendance at school, and headteachers are accountable for the performance of their school and their pupils. So it should be headteachers, working with parents, who decide whether or not to allow a family holiday, or any other kind of absence, after taking into account all the individual circumstances.

Before being elected to this House, I ran the Grant Maintained Schools Foundation and I am proud that this Government have taken forward the principle that we worked so hard to promote—greater autonomy and decision making in schools. So I find it incomprehensible why, on this particular issue, the Government insist that they know better than headteachers what is best for individual children.

There is a misconception that prior to 2013 parents had a right to take their children out of school for up to 10 days for a holiday. That was never the case. Headteachers were able to agree to a child being absent on a family holiday in “special circumstances”. It has been said, including by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Schools himself during a debate last October, that the 2013 amendments “clarified” the situation, but I disagree. A change from “special circumstances” to “exceptional circumstances” is a material difference, and it has given rise to markedly different approaches from local education authorities.

We now have a postcode lottery that determines whether a parent is prosecuted. For example, I understand that in the west country Cornwall has issued four “school fines” in the last three years, but Devon, which is just next door, has issued 1,386 such fines in the last year alone. The variation is great even among just primary schools on my island. In one school, the parents of 176 pupils received fines over three years, while another school did not issue any fines at all. That cannot have been the Government’s intention—or, if it was, they are not explaining it well.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the rules that are applied in many local authorities at the moment discriminate against those who simply cannot afford a family holiday during the school holidays? Does he also agree that quality of life, particularly in childhood, is just as important as, and can enhance, the quality of education?

Mr Turner: I agree with both those points and I hope that I make them myself.

It has been said that before 2013 some headteachers felt pressurised into authorising family holidays. I have been a Member of this House for 15 years and I have never had a headteacher say that to me, but it does sound as though it happens occasionally. I believe, however, that the introduction of the holiday fines by statutory instrument in 2013 was like using a cannon to try to kill a fly. The fines are inappropriate and unworkable, and have widespread damaging consequences.

Imran Hussain: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out the inconsistency that we have between districts. On his point about the fines, Bradford is joint second regarding the number of fines administered and it has high levels of deprivation. Does he agree that the amount of the fine—for the average family with three children it is £360, which then doubles to £720—is so grave that in some low-income families it has a negative impact, ultimately, on the children themselves?

Mr Turner: That is something that headteachers should be aware of. Either Bradford is dictating to headteachers that they must do certain things, or it is the Department for Education’s decisions being interpreted in that way. The headteachers do have the authority, and they can say no.
I have great respect for the Minister for Schools. He has achieved some great things during his time in post, but I urge him to consider the outcome of this battle between David and Goliath and, even now, find another way forward, such as scrapping the school fines introduced in 2013 and trusting headteachers to do their job. If he will not do that, can he please tell us today what he will do if the Supreme Court agrees with the magistrates and the High Court and upholds their view—and mine—that an unauthorised family holiday does not necessarily allow the state to criminalise parents who otherwise ensure a child’s regular school attendance?

Finally, I would like to say that my constituent, Mr Platt, wished to be here for the debate but his daughter is taking part in her school sports day. As a responsible parent, who recognises that a wide range of experiences contributes to a good education, he has put attending the sports day ahead of being here today. He sends his apologies.

5.33 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I find myself yet again commenting on English education and looking at it with a different set of eyes, which I hope some Members throughout the Chamber will benefit from.

It is obvious from the debate that this is a difficult problem that is not easily solved. There is no blanket ban in Scotland, and no automatic fines for parents who take their children out of school without authorisation. Local authorities judge how to treat unauthorised absences. The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) made a passionate and informed speech, and as he said, the subject is not going to go away—almost 200,000 people have signed a petition on this difficult ongoing issue.

Parents need to know where they stand, and swift action is needed because of the Isle of Wight decision, which the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) referred to. The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay said that we need common sense, and as I listened to the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) it became more and more apparent that swift action is needed. They both have constituencies with tourism issues, and the regulations cause conflict for those who work in the tourism industry and those who support it.

Another important point is that it is sometimes not a holiday that is being considered but a trip that would make people better at their sport—volleyball, in the case that was mentioned. Andy Murray would not have got to where he was yesterday had he not been given leave at various times to attend tennis camps and pursue his sporting prowess. It seems unfair that regions in England treat unauthorised absences in such different ways, as can be seen from the number of fines that are issued in schools in the Isle of Wight and across Devon and Cornwall. The Minister should be able to respond to that situation and consider it with a bit more care.

The main point I have taken from the debate is that headteachers should be given back discretion, because they best know their own pupils and what works for them. That might well help the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), who is no longer in his place. One of his interventions regarded family bereavements causing people to go to Pakistan with their children, and those families then coming back to face horrendous fines.

Lilian Greenwood: Does the hon. Lady agree that it sounds like the problem is with headteachers’ confidence to use their discretion, rather than with their not having that discretion, which exists at the moment to consider exceptional circumstances?

Marion Fellows: I definitely agree with the hon. Lady. I find it strange that in the system in England, which is so different from the one in Scotland, authority is devolved away from local authorities and down to schools.

It is important that we listen to the almost 200,000 people who signed the petition, because this is a real-life issue for them and their families. Of course educational attainment is important, and of course there are links to attendance—as a former lecturer in a further education college, I can vouch for that—but when headteachers authorise absences for good reasons and teachers know about those reasons, they can provide homework and catch-up sessions, so students can generally catch up. I very much take on board what the hon. Member for Isle of Wight said: a two-week absence should be seen as a 14-day absence across the whole school year. If a student is attending regularly, a one or two-week holiday might not make much different to their attainment.

It is not acceptable to criminalise parents for taking holidays. Parents know what is best for their children, and in that regard I suppose I should declare an interest having, a long while ago, taken my children out of school for a family holiday. I could not have gone away later because I was pregnant with my third child and wanted him to be born in Scotland, not in Scarborough, which was where we were headed.

It is absolutely essential that we, including the Minister, take on board the fact that there is a real difficulty across the UK, not just in England, as parents do their level best to provide for their children in what are, for many, cash-strapped times. We have heard examples of how much additional money is needed to go on holiday in term time. A spokesman for the National Parent Forum of Scotland has said:

“We all know how important family time is, particularly when money is short. But we’d encourage parents to avoid taking their children out of school during term time, as it does impact on their learning.

It would be helpful if holiday companies did not increase their prices so much during school holidays.”

Perhaps the Government should look at that issue.

Gavin Newlands: On that point, we heard earlier about the difference in the price of holidays in and out of term time—a 60% increase, I think. When my family looked at holidays this year we found that the exact same holiday, going from the same airport, with the same room, departing three and a half hours later, was £2,400 more expensive. The prices were £3,700 and £2,400. That is a 62% increase in the space of three hours, let alone three weeks or three months. My hon. Friend is absolutely correct in what she is saying about the holiday companies.
Marion Fellows: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have all been in such circumstances, so perhaps the Government should review how much holidays cost in and out of term time and see whether anything can be done to average prices out across the year. In Scotland, we have struggled for many years with higher holiday and flight costs than England, even to the United States. It costs much more to fly to Miami from Glasgow than it does from London, yet Glasgow is much closer to Miami than London. It is an ongoing issue.

The UK Government should not leave cost increases to the market, but should look at the problem in much more depth. We should remember that although attendance is important, so is understanding why parents lie and are prepared to pay fines to secure holidays at a more reasonable cost or to go on holiday at a time that suits their circumstances. I hope the Minister will take on board what Members from all parts of the House have said and look again at what has been described as a blanket ban across England that reduces the role of teachers, who understand the students under their care.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. Many Members have spoken in this important and relevant debate, which, as the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) said, has revealed that the Government have got it all in a bit of a mess. Nearly 200,000 signatures on the petition is not to be sniffed at, and those concerns deserve to be heard, and heard they have been in the many contributions Members have made.

The current situation is confused and confusing, as the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) outlined in his opening remarks. The only thing that is clear is that the Government acted with the best of intentions in 2013 when they changed the legislation. As their answer to the online petition reveals, they did so to try and correct the widespread misconception that parents were entitled to take their children on holiday during term-time.

The Government argue that such a misconception had taken hold because headteachers had previously been allowed to grant up to 10 days’ leave for special circumstances. The Government decided to come down hard. The result, as their response to the petition illustrates, has been fairly decisive: the number of persistent absentees is down by up to 40%; 6 million fewer school days have been lost; and pupils are missing fewer days at school today than they did in 2010 and are therefore receiving less interruption to their education. There are other results: £5.6 million was paid out by the public in fines last year, which was a 267% increase; 90,000 parents have been fined; and a High Court case has been lost, with possible Supreme Court hearings looming. Parents have no real certainty on where they stand. No wonder there is confusion, but let me make it clear that the Opposition support the Government’s attitude to school attendance. All the evidence shows that regular attendance at school helps ensure our children reach their full potential and can make their way in the world as adults. Indeed, education is the only available path out of the poverty and low aspiration that affects too many of our young people these days.

Angela Rayner: My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon made it absolutely clear that he is seeking to be helpful and that parents, teachers and heads across the country have expressed real concerns. As he stated—I agree with him—we need common sense and clarity, especially around the reaction of Ofsted. I hope the Minister will clarify that important point in his response. Despite the hon. Member for North Devon being an old-fashioned Tory guy, I am pleased and reassured that the Conservatives have clarified that they do not intend to go back to Dickensian times and stick kids up chimneys.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) made some excellent points on how good education is vital for good attainment. She reminded us of the huge effort made by Nottingham City Council and many councils up and down the country to ensure that we have high attendance. They are worried that all their hard work could be lost without urgent clarity from the Government regarding the recent case.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) expressed concerns about a case in his constituency and made a point on what “regular attendance” means. I hope Mr Platt’s daughter has had a good sports day and that she may represent us in the Olympics in the future.

School brings consistency and routine. Every day of school missed can affect a pupil’s chances of developing as well as their classmates, of passing their exams and of gaining good qualifications with which to build their young lives. Seven million parents know the benefits of regular attendance. After all, schools are in session for just 190 out of 365 days a year.

Mr Andrew Turner: The problem is that the hon. Lady is talking generally, but we are talking individually. If she can, she needs to explain the proposal for individual heads, not for the 7 million pupils in the whole country.

Angela Rayner: I make it absolutely clear—Members have already done so—that headteachers have discretion where there are exceptional circumstances. Headteachers have the power and discretion to sanction absences. The difficulty is the definition of exceptional circumstances, as we heard in some of the contributions. According to the proposer of the petition, a cancer diagnosis apparently does not constitute exceptional circumstances, which is deeply regrettable. I sincerely hope that that incident is as rare as parents taking their children on unauthorised absences.

Michelle Donelan: Does the hon. Lady agree that it is preposterous to say, in an era when we trust so much responsibility day in, day out to our headteachers and teachers to look after children and ensure that their wellbeing is safeguarded and their educational needs are met, that we cannot trust those very same people to make a decision or call whether an absence is in the child’s best interests, based on their age, stage of education and other absences throughout the year? Does it not perhaps go so far as to patronise the teaching professions?

Angela Rayner: We have to weigh that against the evidence that says that every day lost through a child’s absence can have a significant impact on their education. The Government’s response has to be to set guidelines,
but headteachers and the community of course have an obligation as part of that. That is still within the remit and powers of the current legislation.

Steve Double: The hon. Lady makes the point that every day a child is absent from school affects its education, but the reason for the absence should be taken into consideration. If the child is absent but participating in something that is fundamentally going to be good for their wellbeing and development as a person, that could be beneficial to their overall education and not necessarily always detrimental.

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman makes a compelling case. There are various reasons why children could be absent from school. From today’s contributions, one of the compelling reasons why people have said they would like to be able to take their children out of school is the motivation of parents to take their children on a family holiday. I completely understand and sympathise with that situation. I have been a parent for many years, and prior to coming to this House, I was on a low income. I understand and feel their frustration at the rise in cost—in some instances it is an increase of as much as 150%. That makes most holidays unaffordable for most hard-working families.

Like other Members, I want the Minister to tell us what talks are under way to work with the travel industry to try to mitigate the cost of holidays for families who have already withstood austerity and are living on the breadline.

I also understand the concern about the level of the fines. If the fine is not paid, the parent can be prosecuted and fined up to £2,500. They can also receive a community order or even be jailed for up to three months, so I share the concerns that many Members have raised.

Following the High Court’s ruling in favour of Mr Jon Platt, the Government have made it clear that they are now considering changing the legislation and strengthening the statutory guidance given to schools and local authorities. We welcome any attempts to clear up any confusion and to remove the doubt and uncertainty about the legal position as we await a final decision on Mr Platt’s case. In the meantime, no one should be in any doubt that parents must ensure their children go to school. This is non-negotiable. Only schools can authorise absence. They have discretion in exceptional circumstances and they will hopefully use that wisely. The vast majority of parents accept that, and they accept that in a decent, law-abiding society, where our children are the country’s most precious asset, sending their children to school is the right thing to do.

5.53 pm

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve once again under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I welcome the response to the debate from the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner). I predicted that she would make a formidable shadow Secretary of State, despite the odd circumstances of her appointment, and today she has confirmed my view. I welcome her support for the Government’s policy, particularly her support for the Government’s attitude to attendance. She clearly shares our concern that attendance is key.

The hon. Lady raised the example of a diagnosis of cancer as not being regarded as exceptional. I refer her and other Members taking part in the debate to the National Association of Head Teachers advice and guidance, which, at point 10, states:

“Families may need time together to recover from trauma or crisis.”

A cancer diagnosis is therefore regarded as an exceptional circumstance, and attending hospital or illness is of course a reason to authorise absence.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for leading this important debate. The subject is close to his heart—we debated the issues fairly recently on 19 May and also in an urgent question that he raised on the Floor of the House. The debate gives me the opportunity to restate the Government’s position on school attendance for parents, schools and local authorities, particularly as I know some parents and schools have been confused by the recent High Court judgment in the Isle of Wight term-time holiday case. I hope I can fulfil the request from the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne to provide clarity on that. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) for his constructive approach and to other hon. Members who have taken part in the debate.

The e-petition states:

“No more school penalty fines and bring back the 10 day authorised absence.”

My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay referred to the 200,000 people who signed the petition. We take that very seriously, but it is a small proportion of the parents of 8.4 million school-age children in this country. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon said that he does not agree with the part of the petition that refers to bringing back the 10-day authorised absence—or does my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay, nor the Government today and nor the Government in 2013.

In 2013, the Government clarified the law to address what was a widespread misconception that parents were entitled to take their children on holiday during term time. No such entitlement has ever existed in law. Teachers and schools support the increased clarity. As anyone who works in schools knows, education is cumulative, and unauthorised absences have a significantly adverse effect on the child who is absent as they miss vital stepping stones towards understanding curriculum content. Unauthorised absences also damage the education of the rest of the class as teachers have to spend time trying to help the absent pupils catch up when they return. The Government clarified the law to ensure that headteachers retained the discretion to authorise a leave of absence by considering the merits of each request and deciding whether it qualifies as an exceptional circumstance. Children should not miss school unless the circumstances are genuinely exceptional.

I refer my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon to point 3 of the NAHT guidance:

“If an event can reasonably be scheduled outside of term time then it would not be normal to authorise absence.”

The converse is that, if an event cannot reasonably be scheduled outside of term time, such as a championship or a sporting event of high significance to the child or
indeed to the country, then of course it would fall within point 3 of the guidance, although it is ultimately a matter for the discretion of the headteacher.

The regulatory changes that we introduced in 2013 have been very successful. Since their introduction, as the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne said, the rate of absence due to term-time holidays has decreased by more than a third. The number of persistent absentees in England’s schools has dropped by more than 40%, from 433,000 in the academic year 2009-10 to 246,000 in 2014-15. Some 6.8 million days were lost due to authorised and unauthorised term-time holiday absence in the 2012-13 academic year. That fell to 4.1 million days in 2014-15—a drop of 2.7 million days—meaning more children sitting in more classrooms for more hours. That has been driven particularly by a drop in absence due to authorised term-time holidays, with only 3.4% of pupils missing at least one session due to authorised term-time holidays in 2014-15, down from 15.1% in 2012-13.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay correctly cited statistics that showed that the rate of agreed term-time holidays is lower for persistent absentees than for other pupils: 0.5% due to family holidays by persistent absentees versus 1.9% for other pupils. However, the situation is reversed for unauthorised term-time holidays: 0.6% of all possible sessions missed for persistent absentees versus 0.3% for other pupils.

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Mr Nick Gibb: [Interruption.] I assume that that is the school that my hon. Friend was talking about. It is making about varying term times, but it presents real difficulties. For instance, a primary school in my constituency that the Prime Minister praised for changing its half-term dates had to revert back after two years because of the pressure on parents with children at other schools that did not change their term dates. It created more problems than it solved.

Steve Double: I understand the point that the Minister is making about varying term times, but it presents real difficulties. For instance, a primary school in my constituency that the Prime Minister praised for changing its half-term dates had to revert back after two years because of the pressure on parents with children at other schools that did not change their term dates. It created more problems than it solved.

Mr Gibb: My hon. Friend raises a real, practical issue about having different term dates in different parts of the country. That is something that the local authority and academies have to take into account when they consider changing term dates to reflect an industry or tourist needs in a particular region. They will have to weigh up the comparative advantage of that inconvenience versus the convenience of the industry that supplies the jobs in that area. That is why the decision needs to be taken locally by people who know how to weigh up those advantages and challenges.

That happened, for example, in Landau Forte Academy in Derby, which has operated on a five-term year since 1992. Eight-week terms are followed by two-week breaks and a four-week summer holiday. The academy feels that a shorter summer holiday is particularly beneficial for pupils from low-income backgrounds, who might not otherwise receive any stimulating activities in the holidays. It takes into account the dates of other local schools to ensure there is always some overlap of holidays. For example, one of its two weeks in October is always half term for other Derby schools.

Bishop Bromscombe School in St Austell, for example, improved school attendance by moving to a two-week May and June half term that allows parents to holiday outside peak times—[Interruption.] I assume that that is the school that my hon. Friend was talking about. It has now reversed that decision. If I had been quicker, I would have omitted that paragraph from my response.[Laughter.] I could, I am sure, cite other examples from around the country of schools that have taken advantage of that freedom.

Our reforms have put teachers in charge of their classrooms and headteachers in charge of their schools. Many measures are available to improve school attendance. Only when all other strategies to improve attendance have failed should sanctions such as penalty notices or prosecution be used. Schools, local authorities and the police have been able to issue penalty notices for unauthorised school absence since September 2004. There were 151,000 penalty notices issued for unauthorised absence in the 2014-15 academic year, up 54% from the 98,000 issued in 2013-14, indicating a continuation of the upward trend since 2009-10. The increase in 2014-15...
was greater than the yearly increases prior to 2012-13, but it is lower than the increase of 88% between 2012-13 and 2013-14.

I believe it is right that local authorities and schools are actively addressing pupil absence. The impact of that can be seen in the historical downward trend in the absence figures, which show that, since 2009-10, almost 200,000 fewer pupils are persistently absent.

Although the Government are disappointed with the High Court judgment on school attendance, we are clear that children's attendance at school is non-negotiable, and we will take the necessary steps to secure that principle. I recognise that the High Court judgment has created uncertainty for parents, schools and local authorities. Given its importance, it is essential that the matter is clarified, which is why we decided to support Isle of Wight Council's request for permission to appeal to the Supreme Court, and why I wrote to all schools and local authorities in England to make it clear that the High Court judgment does not establish that a pupil's attendance above 90% is regarded as regular attendance.

Headteachers are responsible for deciding whether there are exceptional circumstances that merit granting a pupil leave of absence. My letter concluded by explaining to local authorities receiving requests for refunds that the decision in the Isle of Wight case does not require them to refund penalties that have already been paid. The Department for Education expects applications for such refunds to be refused.

Lilian Greenwood: I agree that 90% does not constitute sufficiently regular attendance. Do the Government intend to amend the current legislation to define the term “regular” to give local authorities and schools the clarity that they are looking for?

Mr Gibb: The Government will set out our next steps in due course and will make an announcement. In the meantime, as I have said, I have written to local authorities and schools setting out the current position, notwithstanding the Isle of Wight case. We have supported the Isle of Wight's decision to appeal to the Supreme Court. That is the Government's position, but we will have more to say about next steps in due course.

The Government's commitment to reduce overall school absence is part of our ambition to create a world-class education system. That cannot be achieved if children's education is disrupted due to preventable absences. The evidence is clear: every extra day of school missed can affect a pupil's chance of gaining good GCSEs, which has a lasting effect on their life chances. That is why we take this issue so seriously.

6.8 pm

Steve Double: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to the debate, which has been well informed and clear. I also take the opportunity to thank all the members of the public who signed the petition—nearly 200,000 people—and Dave Hedley from Nottingham, who started it.

We all agree that we want children to attend school regularly and as much as possible. The reasons for persistent absence need to be addressed, but there are clearly a variety of views on whether the existing Government policy is the best way to achieve that.

The Minister made the point that a lot boils down to our view of the difference between “exceptional” and “special”. The more that can be done to make the Government's view of exceptional circumstances clear, the better, so that we can have real clarity. However, what I pick up from headteachers, as many Members have said, is that the real issue is about Ofsted. Where headteachers exercise their discretion, Ofsted appears to take a different view. Anything that can be done to help Ofsted support headteachers a bit more will, I am sure, be much appreciated.

Personally, I still believe that it is strange for us to trust schools to set their own term dates, as the Minister said, but not to trust headteachers to decide what is right and best for individual pupils. I encourage the Minister to look at the situation again, not only to clarify it but to see whether we can bring more common sense and flexibility into it, allowing headteachers to exercise their discretion. They are the ones who know pupils the best.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,
That this House has considered e-petition 129698 relating to penalty fines and authorised absence from school.

6.10 pm
Sitting adjourned.
Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Before James Berry moves the motion, I just want to indicate that quite a number of Members wish to contribute to the debate, which will last only for an hour and a half. Of course, the Front-Bench spokesmen and the Minister will need to make their contributions, so we are looking for brevity if we are to get everybody in.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I beg to move,

That this House has considered children's early years development and school readiness.

As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this motion, which had cross-party support, for debate. I also thank Save the Children, for their help in preparation for the debate.

I would like to record my profound sadness at the death of Jo Cox, who was one of the signatories to the application for this debate. The subject meant a lot to her and she would have made a very valuable contribution were she here with us.

It is a real privilege to speak on this subject given my family background. Both my parents were teachers who dedicated their lives to improving children’s life chances, and they were firmly of the view that all the interventions available to the state, investment in education was the best tool for promoting social mobility. It is fair to say that since my parents finished their teaching careers, a significant body of evidence has developed that suggests that the best and ripest time for interventions that have an impact on a child’s life chances is in the first two years of a child’s life.

I was delighted to stand last May on a platform that included a commitment to invest in the early years, including by doubling the availability of free childcare for three and four-year-olds from 15 to 30 hours. Indeed, the Prime Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) launched that policy at Advantage Day Nursery in Tolworth in my constituency. As they were completing a puzzle with some four-year-old children, one child looked at the Prime Minister and said, “David, why are all those people taking photographs of us?” The Prime Minister’s response was, “If we finish this puzzle, they might just go away.” Well, the puzzle was duly completed, the election was won and this House has now delivered on the Government’s commitment to 30 hours of free childcare, which will be rolled out next year.

By looking at every single agency that is involved in a child’s life during that time. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the best starts in life is to grow up in a strong, stable family, whatever the make-up of that family? In such a family, a child can enjoy secure relationships, which they can then develop in school with teachers and with other pupils. That gives them a firm ground on which to proceed in their educational life.

The purpose of today’s debate is to ensure that the opportunity provided by the Government’s significant investment is grasped with both hands so that children’s life chances really are improved. I will make three key points, which are about the importance of children’s early years to their development; the lasting impact of poor early years input; and how the Government can make the best of this opportunity to promote social mobility.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): My hon. Friend talks about the importance of the early years. Does he agree that one of the best starts in life is to grow up in a strong, stable family, but the presence of one or two good parents—and, where that is not possible, the presence of good early years education—can make a real difference to a child’s life chances.

Recent data have shown just how important a child’s early years are to their development. The National Academy of Sciences in the United States found that: “Virtually every aspect of human development, from the brain’s evolving circuitry to the child’s capacity for empathy, is affected by the environments and experiences that are encountered in a cumulative fashion, beginning in the prenatal period and extending throughout the early childhood years.”

Evidence has demonstrated that the rapid development of the brain in the first few years of a child’s life provides the foundation for future health, wellbeing and attainment. Without stimulating environments and experiences in those early years, children will fail to develop the skills that they need, particularly language skills, in the same way as their peers. The extent to which a child’s life chances are fixed in the first two to four years is truly astonishing, particularly in the field of communication skills, which provide the foundation for vocabulary development and the understanding of language. They are a springboard to the literary skills needed to get through school.

A responsive adult caregiver can minimise the effects of significant stresses on a child’s development, such as growing up in poverty. That echoes the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona...
I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman that the early years point to later development. As I am sure other hon. Members will have done in theirs, I have seen that well led operations are always the most successful, particularly when they are led by professional early years practitioners.

Children who start behind stay behind, and vice versa. Given that children who start and stay behind are more likely to come from families in socioeconomically deprived areas, a cycle of disadvantage is created. That cycle can be broken by improved guidance and support for parents and improved early years offers to ensure that when children arrive for their first day of primary school, they are ready to learn, whatever the circumstances into which they were born.

Finally, on how the Government can make the best of this opportunity, it is important to start by recognising what they have done. They have committed to investing nearly £3 billion a year in the early years, the greatest sum ever, to boost the availability and quality of the early years offer. There are a number of ways in which they can ensure that that massive investment has maximal impact on boosting social mobility. Those who speak later in the debate will no doubt add their own suggestions, but I have four.

The first involves the workforce. In Kingston, as in the rest of the UK, there are some excellent early years educators. Some are qualified early years teachers and others are not, but the workforce is bound to increase significantly when the additional offer of 15 hours a week comes into force next year. It is encouraging that the Government plan to deliver an early years workforce strategy; that offers welcome recognition of the important role of that workforce in a child’s early development.

Unsurprisingly, international studies have found that good-quality, graduate-led childcare secures the best early years outcomes, but the evidence also shows that good-quality early education disproportionally benefits boys and children from disadvantaged backgrounds—the very groups currently being left behind—not only in the short term but right through primary and secondary school. Equally, the evidence shows that low-quality childcare has no benefit, or even a negative impact on a child’s development.

Early years educators and staff with equivalent qualifications can play a critical role in creating high-quality learning environments in a nursery, providing leadership and increasing the skills of other staff. What assurances can the Minister give that the early years workforce strategy will include plans to attract and retain enough bright staff for us to achieve the ambition of an early years teacher in every nursery setting?

My second suggestion is to increase the availability of speech and language therapy services. I was recently fortunate enough to meet the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists and to see the speech and language therapy services provided by Your Healthcare in Surbiton, in my constituency. From those briefings, it is clear to me that access to high-quality SLT is vital to ensure that parents and early years staff are trained in the right strategies to help a child’s verbal communication development, and to enable early identification and specialist intervention when a child shows signs of a speech and language deficit.
Nevertheless, as the 2008 report by Mr Speaker—the Bercow report—showed, the availability of quality SLT services for nought to 19-year-olds is patchy across the country and greater consistency is required. It is not possible, or indeed desirable, to have a full-time speech and language therapist in every single nursery, but high-quality SLT input into the curriculum and SLT-facilitated training for all staff in early years settings would be a big step forward. I hope that Kingston Council will consider funding such a programme locally, and that other local authorities will do the same nationwide.

My third suggestion is that we do not ignore the additional requirements of children with special educational needs or disability—a subject close to my heart, as my mother was a special needs co-ordinator. In London, 0.8% of children benefiting from early education have an education, health and care plan, the highest percentage in the country. The cost of providing childcare for children with special educational needs or a disability, whether or not they have a formal plan, is higher than for children without special needs. Under the current Government proposals, it is not entirely clear whether providers delivering the additional 15 hours for EHCP or SEND children will receive additional funding to meet those children’s needs. I would be grateful for the Minister’s clarification.

Finally, on take-up, the Government have introduced a number of early years schemes since 2010. Research by the Sutton Trust and the National Audit Office shows that although take-up for early years offers has generally been good, it has been poorer among the most disadvantaged families. From 2010 to 2015, uptake of the 15 hours of free childcare was 98% in the least deprived areas, but only 90% in the most deprived areas. The figures for the offer for two-year-olds are more stark. Against a departmental aspiration of 73% to 77% take-up, only 58% of parents of disadvantaged two-year-olds have taken up the offer. I appreciate that there may be more up-to-date figures, but those were the figures available to me. The very children who need such interventions, for which the Government are making funding available, are the least likely to receive them.

I know that the Department for Education advertises its early years offers, but the advertising campaign appears to be missing some of its core target audience. Given the disparity in uptake, it seems to me that a better solution would be to mandate the provision of a user-friendly information sheet to all new parents. One fixed point of parental interaction with the state might be when parents register their child’s birth; they could then be provided with the crucial information about what is on offer to help their children.

In his January speech on life chances, our Prime Minister recognised that the early years present a window of opportunity, saying:

“Destinies can be altered for good or ill in this window of opportunity.”

In the early years, parents can make a huge difference to their children’s life chances, as can the state through early years education. We have seen how high-quality early education can transform children’s future, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. If we want to achieve social justice and promote social aspiration, we must ensure that the Government’s welcome investment in the early years makes the best possible impact in that short window of opportunity. I look forward to hearing hon. Members’ contributions about how best to achieve that, and the Minister’s remarks on how he will ensure that it is achieved.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. To give further guidance on the interpretation of “brevity”, it will mean three and a half to four minutes; then I think we will get everybody in.

9.48 am

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is, as ever, a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) for securing this important debate, and for his thoughtful opening remarks. I would particularly like to associate myself with his remarks about our dear friend, the late Jo Cox. We remember her fondly today.

I will be brief. I want to talk about poverty and its impact on children’s early years development and readiness for school. I recently produced a report on child poverty in my constituency, which showed that one in five children live in poverty. By any metric, that is a deeply concerning statistic. A childhood that is safe, supportive, warm and healthy, with the prospect of a bright future ahead, should be the right of every child, not just a luxury for some. It is important because how people start their life heavily determines what the rest of their life will be like. For those born into poverty, it is hard to climb out of it.

We know that poverty has a negative impact on children’s development in their earliest years. Figures from Save the Children, which does incredibly important work on early years development, show that in my constituency last year more than 200 children fell behind before they had even started school. Nationally, one in three children in England start school without meeting the Government-recommended level for early development. That should shame us all and ensure that we redouble our efforts to stop children falling behind.

A lot of good work is being done to stop children falling behind. In particular, I draw attention to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen), who has been a champion of early intervention for many years and was heavily involved in the cross-party manifesto “The 1001 Critical Days”, which contains a number of sensible policy suggestions. The Early Intervention Foundation is also leading the way on this issue by championing early intervention and, crucially, evaluating the evidence to find out what works.

Stopping children falling behind in their earliest years will require the Government to be bolder in their approach to tackling the root causes of child poverty and of children falling behind. I had hoped that a step towards that bolder approach would be delivered in the life chances strategy, which we were told would be forthcoming after the EU referendum. I was disappointed to learn that the announcement of the strategy has now been pushed back. I urge the Government to bring it forward at the earliest opportunity.
I make the case to the Minister that the possibility of new leadership at the top of the Government offers fresh opportunities to look again at these issues. There is no doubt that some of the Government’s measures over the past six years have contributed to children in my constituency remaining in or falling into poverty. There is now an opportunity to change that, so I urge the Government’s new leadership to be ambitious.

I am bringing forward a private Member’s Bill that will seek to legislate for a target to reduce child poverty and to introduce steps to measure how well the Government are performing in achieving that target. I would be happy to work with the Minister and the Government on the Bill, and urge them to consider the idea seriously. We can end the scandal that is child poverty only by everyone in this place working together, with national and local government working across society. I hope this important debate can be a step towards that goal.

9.52 am

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) for securing this debate.

I would like to take the debate in a slightly different direction. I was a school governor for a long while before I came into this place, covering early years and senior years, and I have four children. I am concerned about, and want us to bear down on, the fact that the problem is not diminishing; school resilience, early years development and school-readiness are increasing problems throughout all parts of society. While I am talking, the Minister should keep in mind the fact that mine is a large, rural constituency. There are enormous problems with delivering in rural environments as opposed to metropolitan ones, such as the relevant organisations not having enough staff.

I shall concentrate first on the fact that school-readiness is not a “one hit”; it has to be started from the beginning. Early years teachers in the readiness setting cannot do it in that final year, with four-year-olds. It has to start earlier. We know what the problems are: they were largely indicated in the NSPCC report; the important research on speech and language therapy that was carried out for the Scottish Parliament in 2014; Speaker Bercow’s report in 2008; and the work done by Save the Children and Newcastle University in 2013. But what about the solutions?

Speech and language enable our children to communicate. If they cannot communicate, they are disadvantaged—end of. In Suffolk, we have a paucity of speech and language therapists. That is probably because the demand on the system is rising. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton said, we need to address that problem.

We teach our children through nursery rhymes and repetition. We now have less talk in our daily lives and more use of mobile devices and so on. Our children face away from us when we are pushing them in prams. From their earliest start, children need to look at an adult’s face to see our facial expressions. Not one Member present will not have laughed at a baby taking a little bit of lemon in its mouth and looking as if it has been given something dreadful to taste. These things help our children to learn and are incredibly important.

The way we ask our children to do things is important. If someone says, “Cake?” to a child, they can say yes or no. If someone says, “Does Emily want a piece of cake?”, that gives the child the ability to interact and develop language. A child who has had the benefit of good language skills before they go to school is not only not 18 months behind—those months are impossible to make up—but will accelerate through school.

Children learn to listen when we talk. As we know in this place, the ability to listen can be very useful throughout life. Children must learn resilience. It is hugely important that they are allowed to fail. The rise in mental health issues later in children’s lives shows that teaching them resilience—letting them understand that they can fail in a situation and that that is not wrong—helps them.

We do not do enough to develop personal skills. Children must be allowed to put on their own coats. One in four children arrive at school in nappies. It is absolutely criminal that teachers have to try to teach while spending their time getting children dry, and that is particularly difficult if there are few classroom assistants. I had four kids under five. Mine all got dry by 18 months, because it is ruddy expensive to leave them in nappies. There is no excuse. It was felt discriminatory to insist children were dry, but it is not. We should be providing environments that help parents to understand. Parenting support is one thing that I ask for.

Outdoor play is also important. Children climb and improve their muscle tension. A lot of children arrive at school unable to hold a chubby crayon because they have held iPads and other such things. Children need to play and to explore. We need to build that into their routine.

I urge the Minister to think of rural areas and not treat them the same as towns, particularly in relation to workforce planning. We parents buy our childcare for the hours that suit us. That might not work with the business model of nurseries and the early years provision that enables school readiness. As the Bercow report and my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton said, we need to improve speech and learning support. We need to consider parenting classes to encourage supportive families around our children, to ensure that children do not fail in the system.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. Speeches should now be kept to around three minutes.

9.57 am

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) for securing this debate on such an important subject.

In these times of national turmoil, as the UK looks to redefine its status in the world and concerns about our economy loom large, it has never been more important for us to fulfil the potential of all our citizens. It has never been more important to ensure that we give our children every educational advantage available. We need each and every one to be equipped to play their part.

The previous Labour Government understood that education is the foundation for all: “Education, education, education”. In that context, there is a lot of talk of
GCSEs and A* to C grades, and, as a former secondary school teacher, parent, school governor and nursery school governor, I know that they are extremely important.

In my constituency, which is fast becoming a hub for advanced manufacturing and is developing as a centre of prosperity, there is much talk of improving educational standards. It is vital that we all recognise the starting point. The launch pad for our children is not in secondary school, when they are aged 11, and nor is it in primary school. It is in those very important pre-school early years that the foundations for success are laid.

Consider the fact that the total size of the human brain is 95% of its maximum size by the age of six. That is really important. It is true that cortical and subcortical components of the brain change dramatically during childhood and adolescence, but the fact remains that 95% of human brain function is developed by the age of six, so what happens in the early years is incredibly important for the individual’s future wellbeing and economic success.

Of course, the earliest education for the child begins in the home. When that is compromised in deprived communities, when that is limited because parents and carers have themselves been deprived of education, opportunities and extended experience, when that is curtailed because every ounce of the parents’ energy is expended on grinding out an impoverished existence, the child is deprived of crucial learning opportunities and so often disadvantaged from the outset.

It is especially for those reasons that the state must concentrate on providing quality early years education. The experiences of a child in their early years are critical for their future, encouraging the drivers of learning, curiosity and imagination, as well as critical learning behaviours. Self-regulation, resilience and empathy are key to a child having positive early learning experiences.

Indeed, there is a growing body of understanding that demonstrates that these early behaviours have a significant impact on life chances and employment prospects. Recent research has clearly shown that children who have access to quality nursery school education go on to high levels of school achievement, have positive attitudes and achieve higher test scores. They are less likely to need remedial or special education; they are more likely to go on to further and higher education; and they are more likely to have stable employment. They have a significantly lower incidence of involvement in criminal activity, are less likely to need access to social services and are less likely to engage in substance abuse.

Therefore, it is clear that if we genuinely want to effect change in our country, we should begin in these early years. Only yesterday, I was speaking to a nursery school teacher in Tower Hamlets—I will have to leave her comments for another time, as my time this morning is limited. I will just say that I am extremely concerned that we are confusing childcare with quality nursery school education and I am worried to hear from nursery school headteachers that recent cuts in budgets for nursery schools mean that it is difficult for them to keep quality and qualified nursery staff in their schools. It is admirable that the Government want to increase free childcare to 30 hours, but that must not be confused with quality education. The Government know the difference and should invest accordingly, because while childcare can educate children, it is not the same as planned nursery education. For the sake of our children and the prosperity of the country, I ask the Minister to give an assurance that the Government will prioritise investment in early years education.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. To assist with time discipline, the speech time is now going to be displayed on the screens around Westminster Hall.

10.2 am

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) on securing this debate. I also declare an interest as a former infant schoolteacher. Indeed, almost exactly six years ago I was just ending my previous career. My first day as an infant school teacher remains the scariest new day in any job I have ever undertaken. Sadly, infant school was not the last time that I have dealt with five-year-olds’ behaviour.

I will talk briefly about the Imagination Library, which is a project we have developed in north Lincolnshire and in the east riding of Yorkshire—people may know of it. It is a free book-gifting scheme, which was originally established by Dolly Parton in Tennessee in the United States, and then brought here some years ago. As an infant schoolteacher, I obviously understood the importance of kids reading at home and how much better prepared they were when they turned up at school having actually opened and read a book, and read with their parents or carers. Sadly, for too many of the children I used to teach in Scunthorpe, that was not the case.

When I became an MP, I was fortunate enough to be able to work with North Lincolnshire Council, under the innovative leadership of Baroness Redfern and Councillor Rob Waltham, to establish the Imagination Library scheme in north Lincolnshire. The scheme now delivers books to 87% of all five-year-olds in our borough. Since we started the scheme in 2013, it has already had a significant impact on the results of kids who arrive at school. In 2015, 70% of our five-year-olds in north Lincolnshire were judged to have achieved a good level of development by the time they arrived at school, compared with just 53% in 2013.

This free book-gifting scheme is wholly integrated with the NHS locally and with our children’s centres—of course, we have protected and actually expanded some of our children’s centres in north Lincolnshire. The scheme is also integrated with our library service—of course, in north Lincolnshire we have actually built new libraries and extended all of our library opening hours to support this scheme, which has had a really transformative effect.

As I said, 87% of all five-year-olds in north Lincolnshire are now registered with the scheme; indeed, in parts of my patch, on the Isle of Axholme, 92% of children are registered. The scheme is open to every child and it is having a really transformative effect. In the other part of my constituency, which is in the east riding of Yorkshire, the council has not funded the scheme, but I myself run and fund a scheme in Goole that has 56 children signed up to it. Getting books out to kids from a very early age to get them reading and learning with their parents gives them the very best start in school.
I do not have time today to go on too much further, and have just two questions to put to the Minister. First, what assessment has been made of schemes such as the Imagination Library? The Scottish Government provide the Imagination Library to all looked-after children in Scotland and perhaps we could consider doing something similar. Secondly and finally, will he look at the Imagination Library’s bid to the Department for Education’s children’s social care innovation programme, which will mean more of these books being distributed to more children nationally?

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I will focus on early intervention and school-readiness. In 2013, Home Start UK, working with the Department for Education, undertook a pilot programme over a two-year period called “Big Hopes, Big Futures”. The report that emerged from the pilot showed that, in 2014, there was a 19% gap in achieving a “good level of development” between children on free school meals and their classmates. Action for Children’s most recent report shows that, in the past two years, there has been improvement but by only 1%. Ofsted’s assessment in 2015 was that the gap between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers, in terms of early years development and school-readiness, was not closing.

Why are we not getting results? I had a quick look at some of the Library briefing papers on poverty in the UK and on early intervention from the Library. We have Healthy Child programmes, Healthy Start and Public Health England’s seven national priorities, and we are getting support from health visitors and family-nurse partnerships, so why are we not getting the improvements that all of us wish to see?

We can make a difference, but solely increasing free childcare hours should not be seen as a panacea. Families supported by the “Big Hopes, Big Futures” programme saw an improvement of between 25% and 33% in their children’s school-readiness for language, cognition, behavioural adjustment, daily living skills and family support. Not only did that programme directly affect the children, but it helped the parents in many ways, from improving their physical and mental health to improving their skills and knowledge of early years and child development, as well as their work-readiness.

If we know the impact of those schemes, why are two out of every five children in deprived areas lagging behind their classmates on measures of child development? That is true around the country and true in my constituency of Great Grimsby, where 34% of children—more than 400 children—are not reaching a good level of development by the age of five. The answer is not all about academic achievement, because everything from the ability to make friends and form good relationships to understanding feelings form part of what it means to be school-ready.

A study undertaken in 2000 found that socio-emotional and behavioural development help to improve a child’s “teachability”, and do far more than a traditional simplicistic focus on reading and arithmetic would. The “Big Hopes, Big Futures” report cited international studies that demonstrate the “pivotal” importance of family support in the transition from home to school. It recognised that many families in the “deprived” category have multiple needs, and that helping them requires complex intervention-based solutions. That is why I am surprised and disappointed that a scheme in my constituency that has existed since 1995 to provide exactly those sorts of solutions was first of all wound down to a narrow perinatal pilot scheme and then closed in March this year, owing to a lack of funding.

I know that I only have a little time left—well, not any time at all—but I will extend my speech anyway before I get told off. I will just mention the funding, because there are issues around where pupil premiums are spent and whether they are really making a difference, and around the reductions in and changes to the early intervention grant—that funding was reduced to a figure 20% below the original 2010-11 allocation. It also included a specified amount for education places for disadvantaged two-year-olds, but because it was not ring-fenced by local authorities, that money did not have to be spent in that way. Subsequently, the funding was subsumed into a dedicated schools grant; the payment of the remaining early intervention grants was transferred into the business rates retention scheme; and the remaining £150 million was centralised into the DfE for adoption and reform grants. We need to ensure that that funding gets to the appropriate areas and schemes that can actually help disadvantaged children.
and the associated funding formula changes to review what he expects of school-readiness? I note that in the 2014 “Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage”, school-readiness is rightly laid out but, currently, settings report to local authorities on request. The Minister might like to look at that. He has a puzzled look on his face—it is on page 15 of the statutory early years framework document. I urge him to see what can be done to help childcare and early years settings work with schools, as in the local example I presented.

10.12 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I was pleased to serve on the Childcare Bill Committee last December to try to improve what was, on the face of it, tremendously powerful legislation designed to make a huge difference for our youngest children before school. Sadly, Ministers did not recognise the flaws in their plans, so I tabled a new clause that would have meant they were mandated to ensure that all three and four-year-olds had access to high-quality, flexible and accessible early education and childcare provision, delivered by well-qualified, confident and experienced practitioners and led by an early years graduate. It would also have required Ministers to publish proposals for the development of the early years workforce. At the time, early language attainment was increasing, but the pace of improvement was so slow that it would have taken more than a decade of similar progress to get all children school-ready by the age of five. Figures from Action for Children suggest that one in three children across England still arrives at school not ready to learn. Yes, I recognise that policy changes take time to have an impact, but I have reservations about whether the world of childcare out there is able to deliver what the Government say is needed.

Half of children living in low-income families will arrive at school ill-equipped, as will almost 40% of children who live in our most deprived communities. In the north-east, where my constituency sits, fewer than two thirds of children will have reached a good level of development before starting school at the age of five, which is significantly lower than the 70% in the south-east. However, the gap between the most and the least deprived communities is growing, while the gaps between the north and the south and between boys and girls have not changed in three years. The Government will, I am sure, have the support of every Opposition Member if they can narrow that gap during the current Parliament. We must not settle for the small changes of recent years. Will the Minister therefore deliver a new measure of child development at age five to allow a national picture of child development that incorporates a definition of school-readiness, to remove the uncertainty regarding the outcomes the Government believe early years education should deliver? Will they set ambitious goals to focus on those children whose life chances are being blighted from their earliest years, to close the attainment gap?

High-quality early education—specifically nurseries led by graduate early years teachers—has been shown to have the most significant impact on the early language skills of young children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. But therein lies the cruelty of the current system. Childcare settings in disadvantaged areas are the least likely to be of high quality, which is why I argued during the Childcare Bill Committee for the Government to have both the power and the responsibility to ensure that all our children are cared for and taught by highly qualified professionals. Instead, we have a situation in which nurseries are unable to pay the wages needed to attract early years teachers because of the chronic underfunding of the free education entitlement from the Government. At the same time, universities are withdrawing their early years teacher courses because they cannot attract the applicants.

I ask the Minister: when will his long-awaited early years workforce strategy appear and will it include an assessment of the level of provision available and likely to be available in the next few months? Finally, what is he doing to ensure that all children have access to the high-quality care we all desire, delivered by high-quality professionals?

10.16 am

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) on securing this important debate on the investment of resources, time and effort in very young children so that they get the best start in life and at school. It does start with the family, whatever format that family may have, but it is also important that they get access to pre-school hours and nursery education.

Starting school can be a stressful time for any child, but for a child with special educational needs it can be even harder, and it is on that aspect that I wish to concentrate from a Northern Ireland perspective. Imagine the challenges that every child faces on their first day in the playground—socialising with new children, being in a new environment and coping with separation from parents. Imagine dealing with all that while also dealing with the challenges of an educational disability, such as Down’s syndrome or autism. Such children may make up only a minority of those starting school each year, but we in this House never lose sight of the duty we have to give children with special educational needs the best educational start possible. I am afraid I am not confident that that is happening in the Northern Ireland context.

Earlier this year, the parents of young children with special educational needs were sent letters telling them that the pre-school hours they were entitled to would be cut from four and a half to two and a half. Those plans could only have hurt children’s school-readiness, which is why the leadership forum for special schools came out so strongly against them, particularly on the grounds that they would give nurseries less time to help children overcome severe to extremely challenging behaviour. We have been told that the plans have been put on hold, and I suggest to the Minister that it might be useful to have some good exchanges with Ministers in the devolved Administrations to pool knowledge and expertise and implement best practice from the devolved regions alongside that which exists in England to ensure that children with educational and behavioural challenges get the best start in life.

Despite that review of the plans, we are still hearing of uncertainty at an individual school level. The Northern Ireland Education Authority has stated that the root cause of the problem is an unprecedented number of
families needing to find places at special needs nurseries. If that is so, it fits with the broader picture that we have heard about today of children being brought up in poverty: children who face poverty are also facing that more difficult challenge. Children’s early education and long-term life chances are being held back by a scarcity of accessible nursery places and a lack of action from decision makers.

I am conscious, Mr Evans, that I have gone over my time. The important thing is to find solutions, and that is about investment in resources and pooling knowledge from across the regions.

10.19 am

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. The way in which a child develops in their early years has a huge influence on every aspect of their lives, including their future economic wellbeing, educational attainment and health. More poignantly perhaps, a child’s early years development is key to their emotional development and their ability to sustain positive and meaningful relationships. Yet according to the Department for Education’s most recent early years foundation stage profile results, one in three children starts school without having achieved the expected level of early development.

To our shame, but perhaps not to our surprise, the likelihood of falling behind is much higher among the poorest children. In my constituency of Rotherham, 38% of children—almost four in 10—are not reaching a good level of development at the age of five. In fact, Rotherham ranks in the bottom 25%. How can four children in every 10 in my constituency be arriving for their first day of school unprepared to learn, socialise and thrive? It is appalling that we have a system where the postcode a child is born into can determine their chances of success have already been determined even before they begin formal education? I find the situation deeply frustrating, because it is something that this House could prevent with the right interventions.

Parents are the first mentors and role models for their children. They have a strong influence on their learning and play a fundamental role in helping their child develop. For a number of reasons, however, some parents simply need a bit of extra guidance on how to positively interact with their child. Through my Dare2Care campaign to prevent child abuse, I know that parents from all backgrounds are calling for support. There seems to be an assumption that people innately know how to be parents or carers. At the other end of the spectrum, it is also important to ensure that parents or carers feel that they have a consistent economic environment in which they can nurture and help their children grow.

Notwithstanding the significant amount of research over the years in the whole field of child development, it is clear and self-evident that a loving and caring environment in which to grow is the most important gift that can be given to a child. I am sure that many parents in the room would do things differently in how they brought up our children, and I am no exception to that, but one key aspect for a child is the consistency of the care given to them by their parents or carers. At the other end of the spectrum, it is also important to ensure that parents or carers feel that they have a consistent economic environment in which they can nurture and help their children grow.
It is therefore the responsibility of Government to ensure that the wider economic conditions in which families bring up children are as stable as possible. There also has to be the effective use of policy drivers, which many Members have alluded to.

It is the responsibility of us all to ensure that we have a nation of healthy children who have been given the best start in life, who live in a safe environment and who have good support and social systems there to help them. In particular, for those children who are not fortunate enough to have a stable, loving, caring family, it is all the more important that we do everything we can to ensure that they have as good a chance as possible to develop into mature, socially and personally confident children whose self-esteem is not damaged by their circumstances.

I hope this debate helps to play a part in keeping this very important issue on the agenda. I thank the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) for giving us the opportunity to say these few words of support. I also thank such organisations as Action for Children and Save the Children, which remind us of our responsibilities in this crucial area of social policy.

10.27 am

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) on securing this debate. I cannot compete with the expertise. A lot of people have done a lot of work in this field already. I am, however, the grandfather of six grandchildren, all of whom are close to me. Two live next door. I spend at least as much time every week playing narrative games with Playmobil as I do making speeches in this place, and to somewhat better effect.

The goal of education—and life, I suppose—is the fulfilment of potential, and fulfilment is far more variable than potential. Crucial to that, as we have all recognised, is a good start. What does that good start look like? I think it can be defined only in broad terms, recognising that not every child does or can develop in precisely the same way. There is a danger in this debate of being far too precise, because a good start is not the same as an accelerated start, and the phenomenon of tiger mums and people fretting about their child’s development is a new cultural phenomenon. In our society, we tend to value educational learning, possibly above other factors that other cultures might value, such as emotional resilience or social skills.

Broadly, however, we have a concept of what a happy, developing, normal child is like and what their capabilities should be, and we simply find that some children do not match up to that, and it is fair to call them deprived. They are deprived in a range of senses: sometimes deprived of environmental stimulus and emotional support, and often deprived of parental attention and opportunities for creative play. Those are all forms of deprivation, and such children therefore arrive at school less capable of taking advantage of school and without parents who can teach or encourage them in how to take advantage. School therefore becomes a struggle and life becomes a struggle. We all recognise that; it has been well laid out by other Members in the debate.

Sure Start and many other policy initiatives sought to correct that. There has been a whole pile of initiatives, local and national, and they have varied in reach, impact, resource and effectiveness. I pay tribute to all the researchers and policy makers. I pay particular tribute to a Member who is not here and who has done an enormous amount of work on this matter in this House: the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen). He has done a tremendous amount to put it on the agenda. Some of the policies, it has to be said, are slightly conflicted. Is childcare primarily about developing the child or about freeing the employment market a little bit?

My central and only point is that key to so much of this is the acquiring and teaching of parental skills. Children spend a lot of time at home—more than they ever will at school—and we cannot just assume that the skills are transmitted and passed on. As a Government, we recognised that fact, but we tinkered rather than addressed it full on. When Sarah Teather was in the chair that the Minister now occupies, some pilots were conducted and the Prime Minister spoke warmly about developing parental skills.

Most of the learning that we engage in during our hard-pressed time in school—learning the pluperfect, trigonometry or how to make a coat hanger, none of which I have had to use—has not done me any good in life. But I have had to be a parent, as will most people. Early learning development is simply not on the school curriculum in the significant way that it ought to be. There is a serious danger that in trying to develop all the policies outlined today we leave parents out of the equation, and we also leave the training of parents as very much a backstop issue rather than something that we ought to put up front as a major policy issue for any Government.

10.30 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I rise to speak in this debate as somebody who has experience of being an English teacher for more than 23 years before I entered this place. As the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) said, there are certainly similarities in the kind of behaviour that we might encounter. I have a particular interest in this debate from that perspective. I do not think I have ever been involved in a debate where there has been such consensus about the need for all children from all backgrounds to receive the best start that we can possibly give them in life, which they deserve regardless of the circumstances into which they are born. For that reason, I thank the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) for securing this debate today and for encouraging this consensus that is so unusual in this place.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) pointed out something that I think we would all agree on: if a child starts school when they are not school-ready, the entire school experience from primary 1 right through to the end of secondary is tainted by that. At worst, school is a very negative experience and at best it is tolerated. We have all talked about the importance of increasing the hours for early learning and childcare to 30 hours a week. That is to be applauded, but I want to pick up on some of the points that have been made. Fundamental to that increase is not simply providing childcare, but providing qualified professional experienced staff.

In Scotland, the 30 hours will be rolled out with the addition of 600 new early learning and childcare centres with 20,000 more fully qualified and professional staff.
That is very important when rolling out extra childcare for the purposes of making sure that children are school-ready. But we can make all the policy decisions we like; we can sit here and pontificate and perhaps even throw investment, money and resources at the problem, but the experience at home is fundamental. We need to support parents at home as they bring up their children, particularly those who live in poverty and face much more challenging circumstances than we or they would like.

I want to bring a new dimension to the debate this morning because I believe that fundamental to child development, to being school-ready and to being a good citizen—indeed, fundamental to a happy life—is instilling a thirst for learning and an inquiring mind, and we do that through cultivating a love of reading. That must be nurtured in our children, but in order for us to nurture that in our children we need to nurture that in our citizens as widely as possible. That is why I will always argue and kick against any attempts to close libraries, particularly those in my own constituency.

I do not believe it is possible to talk about closing the attainment gap or raising attainment if we deprive citizens, particularly those in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, of access to books, because that is what closing down libraries too often means for too many of our citizens. Access to books for parents and for children is fundamentally and inextricably linked to reading attainment. If we want our children to come to school with inquiring minds, we must introduce them to books as early as possible: not just those living in poverty, but especially those living in poverty. We must support and encourage parents in their endeavours to read with their children so that reading becomes a part of what is done at home.

Alex Cunningham: The hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) talked about the fact that the most needy families do not necessarily engage. The same applies to books and libraries and getting people to go to libraries. What is the Scottish experience in getting people from deprived communities into libraries, and accessing early childcare as well?

Patricia Gibson: I am glad the hon. Gentleman has raised that point because in Scotland we have initiatives. We have the Bookbug, PlayTalkRead and Read, Write, Count campaigns, and every parent with a new child is given a bag of free books for their children. That experience is repeated intermittently as the child goes from birth to the age of five and is supported in nurseries where books—the hon. Member for Brig and Goole talked about the Imagination Library—become integral to raising attainment.

I do not think it is possible to talk about raising attainment unless books are a big part of that equation, so I am delighted that the Scottish Government have taken that on board. I despair when I hear of libraries closing down in any part of the UK, because I know that that means depriving people of books. I grew up in a family where, if I had not had access to a local library, I would not have had access to books, because the school library, such as it was, did not really exist. Books are fundamental to a happy and fulfilled life, to feeding the imagination and creativity, and to feeding the mind. Access to books is fundamental and must be part of this conversation.

Very often when we hear about libraries being closed down, it is about cost cutting and how we cannot afford them and need to make cuts, but some things we cannot count in pounds and pence, such as what we get back in terms of informed citizens who are encouraged and supported, particularly those who have children. We obviously want to reach out to people who do not have children and who do not access the library, but we are talking about the next generation. We need to think about what we lose rather than what it might cost in pounds, shillings and pence. The Scottish Government’s Bookbug, PlayTalkRead and Read, Write, Count campaigns offer universal support for parents regardless of their socio-economic circumstances. Everybody has a stake in this.

Closing the attainment gap is very important, and early intervention is the canvas on which we must paint everything that we do. Early intervention must be about instilling the love of reading into our citizens as they become parents. We cannot afford to leave our children behind: if they are not school-ready for a full school life, it creates all sorts of social problems for the future. How we support parents with young children is an investment in the future. We must in all conscience and from an ethical point of view try to create a more inclusive educational and social environment for our citizens as they grow up and have their own children. We owe it to our children and we owe it to our country.

10.37 am

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I hope to be brief so that I can give the Minister time to respond to the fantastic contributions that have been made. I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) on securing the debate and thank him for his kind words about our friend Jo in his opening comments. I concur with many of his comments, and particularly his recommendations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) made stark comments regarding the one in five children who still live in poverty. I pay tribute to him for his work in tackling that issue. The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) was passionate in her commitment to ensure that the problems of school-readiness and the early years are tackled. As she said, those are growing problems, especially in rural areas. The hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) reminded us that we must continue to consider all children, including those who live under devolved Administrations.

Getting a good start in life should not be a privilege; it is every child’s right. I have documented how my mum could not read or write. I was one of those children who did not see a book before going into education, so I can personally say how important early intervention prior to school is. I am also proud that I was a recipient of wraparound services such as Sure Start when I was a young mum, and I concur with the comments of my hon. Friends the Members for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and for Bootle (Peter Dowd) about that. Those services gave me and many of my friends much-needed support and a hand up in difficult times. The
Labour Government were a trailblazer for early years intervention, and Sure Start is one of Labour’s greatest legacies.

Unfortunately, however, under the current Government, childcare and early years services have been left chronically underfunded. Early intervention services are failing to reach those most in need. Families with young children have borne the brunt of unfair Government cuts, and that looks set to continue in the near future.

My hon. Friends the Members for Burnley (Julie Cooper) and for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) made important contributions about the importance of the early years—that critical time before the age of six. The early years are not only about childcare but about ensuring quality education, which is crucial. We need a bigger vision for early education and childcare. Our kids deserve the best early intervention services that are the envy of the world. The hon. Member for Brigigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) talked about some of his fantastic work before coming to this place and about the importance of library services—he helped set up a library scheme.

When will the Government commit the funds and resources required to match the universal acknowledgement, which we have heard today, of the benefits of the early years system? The Government response to Munro was fine words but no action. Will the Minister explain why the Government did not commit to a statutory duty on local authorities? One in three of the families who were promised free extended childcare by the Government before the last election are now set to miss out, as a result of the Government failing to make their sums add up. That was starkly illustrated in the pilot area of York, where not one childcare provider out of 30 was willing to take up the additional 15 hours due to the pitiful payment of £3.95 per hour.

My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) spoke passionately about the closure of services in her constituency. Why were Labour programmes scrapped, such as the graduate leader fund, which supported graduates to work in private and voluntary nurseries and childcare settings, and the requirement for Sure Start children’s centres in the most disadvantaged areas?

In addition, real-terms spending per child on early education has fallen. There are 763 fewer Sure Start centres, child trust funds are ending, and maternity grants are being cut. Every child deserves an education that enables them to flourish in childhood and sets them up for life in Britain and the world. Early intervention is key to closing the life chances gap that exists for too many young people in constituencies such as mine.

The hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) reminded us of the importance of play in the family setting for learning and development. The first 1,000 days of a child’s life are crucial. What are the Government doing to recognise the importance of putting access to high-quality early education at the heart of Britain’s mission to tackle inequality? Today, 3.7 million children are growing up in poverty in the UK, costing the Government about £29 billion a year.

Parental income can have a profound effect on the educational attainment and long-term life chances of millions of children. Family income remains the most significant factor in a child’s success in education. Will the Minister at least acknowledge that changing child poverty targets could mean that thousands of children are forgotten, missed or left behind?

If we want to tackle poverty and build a truly productive economy, we need to look at how to make life easier for ordinary working families and help parents get back to work. The Government should be looking at how to ease the burden on working people and create a system of world-class early years provision. I am afraid their policies are doing just the opposite. Investing now in the essential formative years of a child’s life will be an investment in our country’s future.

10.44 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Mr Sam Gyimah): I am pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) on securing this important debate.

I agree that improving the life chances of our children is important to all of us, so I will first strike a note of consensus. In this country, we have strong cross-party consensus on the importance of the early years and the need to invest in them. The free entitlement offer was started by the most recent Labour Government, with 12.5 hours of free childcare for all three and four-year-olds. The coalition Government extended that to 15 hours, and the Conservative Government are doubling the entitlement to 30 hours.

In addition, the coalition Government introduced a free early education offer for the most disadvantaged two-year-olds, recognising that we have to start even earlier with disadvantaged children. We also introduced the early years pupil premium, extending the pupil premium in schools to the early years so that disadvantaged three and four-year-olds can get extra funding for reading and intellectual stimulation. I will come on to the detail of that later.

There is therefore cross-party consensus, and the direction of travel in policy is broadly similar. Sometimes, however, in such debates as today’s, some Members seem to have an interest in making out that what is happening is really bad. I am not saying that we can afford to be complacent, but some good work is still going on in early years, in which we lead many parts of the world. For example, the entitlement to free early education for three and four-year-olds, which has an average take-up of about 96%, is unique in the OECD. We have achieved what many other countries in the OECD have not: a universal early education offer. We should be proud of that.

Alex Cunningham: I praise the Minister for his work on childcare, but although putting in all those resources is tremendous, universities are still withdrawing their early years teaching courses, because, as I said in my speech, they cannot attract applicants. The Public Accounts Committee has stated that the Department for Education has no “robust plans” to ensure that there are “enough qualified early years staff so that providers can continue to offer high quality” education. What will he do about that? We can throw as many resources as we like at the problem, but if we do not have enough people being trained to do the job, we will not be able to deliver his ambition and mine.

Mr Gyimah: I will come on to the workforce strategy in more detail, but the simple point is that from 2019-20 we will be investing £6 billion a year in the free entitlement
in this country, which is more than we have ever invested before. If we fund providers, they will be able to pay the quality staff that they need so that they can attract and retain them.

For the early years, we do not have a system such as we have in schools, in which the Government try to control the number of staff going in. Most of our early years sector consists of private or voluntary providers, so we need to ensure that they are adequately funded to be able to attract and retain high-quality staff. That is why the Government made a strategic choice to invest in early years provision even at a time when many other Departments were having to have their budgets retrenched.

Alex Cunningham: As I said, we have all those resources being poured in, but if people are not applying to go to university for the necessary training, how on earth do we get people in? How do we incentivise them further to get them into the profession, so that we can—I repeat—deliver his ambition and mine?

Mr Gyimah: As I said, later this year we will be publishing a workforce strategy to go along with the introduction of the 30 hours of free childcare for three and four-year-olds. The strategy will focus on removing barriers to attracting, retaining and promoting staff. However, I point out to the hon. Gentleman that 87% of children were at level 3 at the moment, compared with 81% in 2010. The proportion of graduates is steadily increasing, with 13% holding at least level 6 qualifications, compared with 8% in 2010. There is still a lot to do, but the direction of travel is positive.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton rightly mentioned the take-up of the free entitlements, in particular by the most disadvantaged. The three-year-old offer is a huge success, with 93% of families taking it up, and 97% of families are choosing to take up the offer for four-year-olds. In the case of the two-year-old entitlement, which is for the most disadvantaged 40% of families, 70% are taking up the offer. It is worth remembering, however, that the take-up of those entitlements is voluntary. Parents do not have to enrol their children, so it is remarkable that we have that many parents doing so.

My hon. Friend made a good point about how we market offers to parents, especially the two-year-old offer. We knew that a lot of disadvantaged families were suspicious of having to send their children to school that early, which was how some perceived it. Or if the mother was at home looking after the child—it was often the mother—they wondered why they should send their child to a nursery. The fact that the Government were involved made some of them nervous, so we did a lot of work in the Department to find new and innovative ways of marketing to those parents, even recognising that changing the colour of an envelope would make it more likely that it would be opened. To some families, brown envelopes looked like they came from the Government, so they would not open them at all, but if we made the envelopes more interesting they were more likely to open them. We are conscious that we need to drive take-up, and we need to look constantly at innovative ways to do so.

Julie Cooper: The Minister is making some important points about encouraging parents to take up the offer. Does he recognise the real concerns of nursery school headteachers that are driving them to come down to Parliament in numbers with their governors—they are coming again tomorrow—to express concerns that they are no longer able to fund qualified teaching staff? That is particularly important in deprived areas.

Mr Gyimah: Nursery schools do a fantastic job. We will publish a reform of early years funding to go with the 30 hours’ free childcare. I have had meetings with those people and understand their concerns. I can give an assurance that we recognise the important work that they do, particularly in disadvantaged areas, and I certainly want it to continue and will do what I can to ensure that it does.

Chloe Smith: An extremely brief factual question: will the Minister give us the results of his consultation and the funding formula he referred to before the summer recess, or should we await that a little later on?

Mr Gyimah: All I can say is that we want to provide that as soon as possible, because we understand the need for providers to prepare so that they can deliver the full 30 hours in 2017—it is in the “urgent” in-tray at the moment.

I will develop my points further and answer some of the questions that have been asked. On take-up, we will publish a workforce strategy shortly. Speech and language is absolutely important. If a child arrives at school and cannot communicate or recognise that those squiggly things on a page are words, and that words are used to form sentences, they have got a problem. One of the things the early years pupil premium is there for is for those disadvantaged kids to get extra funding—about £300 a head—and the nurseries can make a discretionary decision on how to spend that to ensure that those kids do not arrive at school already behind.

Melanie Onn: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gyimah: I will not take any more interventions, because of the time.

We have introduced reforms to improve the standard of literacy in the early years, which has included awarding grants, for instance through the National Day Nurseries Association’s literary champions programme, which supports practitioners to provide a high-quality, literacy-rich experience for all children. In 2015, 80% achieved the expected goal in communication and language, compared with 72% in 2013.

All of that sits in the broader context of life chances. School-readiness cannot be divorced from the broader discussion of life chances. Earlier this year, the Prime Minister set out his vision for improving life chances, and the Government want to transform the life chances of the poorest in our country and offer every child who has had a difficult start the promise of a brighter future.

We are already transforming lives. Since 2010, there are 449,000 fewer children living in workless households. The early years foundation stage framework is improving the quality of early education and care for young children, and our most recent results show that 66% are achieving a good level of development at that stage. A number of
hon. Members touched on that point. It is worth noting that 66% is an increase of 14.6 percentage points in the past two years. The quality of settings continues to improve, with the highest proportion ever—86% of settings—judged good or outstanding in their most recent Ofsted inspections.

We know that some of the poorest children are already behind their peers by age three, before they start school. Such children miss out in the number of words they speak, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton pointed out, although the proportion of school children eligible for free school meals who achieve a good level of development is increasing—it was 51% last year, compared with 45% the year before. However, I will be the first to admit that we still have a long way to go.

Obviously, in considering school-readiness and life chances we also need to take into account what happens in the health sector. A number of hon. Members touched on that. All children aged from two to two and a half are offered a universal health and development review by a health visitor, which includes checking a child’s communication development and referring families to more specialist support if necessary. One thing that I introduced when I became the Childcare Minister was an integrated review for children who are not in early years settings, so that health visitors could recommend and introduce parents to other support services that they might need.

To touch on a point raised by the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh), we also published “What to expect, when?” so that parents know what they can do to support their children’s development in the early years. It is easy for Government to think that we have all the answers, but children, especially in their early years, spend a disproportionate amount of time at home with their parents, so parents need to understand what good development is and what they can do to influence it. That is what our guide is meant to achieve.

Alex Cunningham: I am particularly interested in the role of health professionals and others who go into homes in the most deprived communities. What are the Minister’s policy ideas and instructions to encourage them to play a greater role in directing families to the childcare and literacy support we want them to have?

Mr Gyimah: A lot of home visits are done by health visitors, which is incredibly important. Health visitors are trusted by parents and do a great job. The previous Government and this Government have continued to invest in increasing the number of health visitors. I would like to see more joined-up activity between health and education in the early years. There are a number of great programmes out there, such as the Lambeth Early Action Partnership, which are successful because they join up health and education in early years interventions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) rightly touched on assessment. Obviously Ofsted is one way of holding nurseries accountable and assessing what they do—as I said, 86% of settings are rated good or outstanding—but the early years foundation stage profile is another way of ensuring that individual children reach a good level of development. That will become non-statutory in September, but we are looking at ways of ensuring that we continue to have such evaluation. She therefore raised a relevant and important point.

The point was made that we should differentiate between childcare and early education, especially when we talk about the 30 hours of childcare. I completely agree that childcare arranged for the purposes of parents’ employment is completely different from early education. That is why the first 15 hours of the offer is universal—so that every three and four-year-old in the country is entitled to 15 hours of free early education. Why 15 hours? Evidence from the effective pre-school, primary and secondary education longitudinal study, carried out over 13 years, suggests that children at that age need a little bit of education every now and again. They need little and often, not the equivalent of a school week at the age of three and four. The eligibility for the second 15 hours—the employment offer—is based around parents’ work.

Alex Cunningham: Perhaps the Minister can give us a few seconds on workforce development.

Mr Gyimah: I have made it clear that we will publish the workforce strategy, which will look at workforce development.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) asked whether I would consider the bid by the Imagination Library. That bid is interesting, so I will take that on board and look at it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered children’s early years development and school readiness.
Compensation for Rail Passengers

11 am

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered compensation for rail passengers.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. May I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), for being here to respond on behalf of the Government? May I also apologise to her for once again raising an issue involving trains?

My constituency, as the Minister knows, is home to many commuters. We are just under an hour away from London Liverpool Street station, and tens of thousands of my constituents travel on the Great Eastern main line every day. I admit that they have many complaints—short formations; staff members being unavailable; broken toilets; and services disrupted by too much rain, wind, sun and every other type of weather. My Twitter feed is often inundated with criticisms of our train operator; most are valid, and some less so.

All of us in this House know that few things are more annoying than a delayed train. All too often, we have swept this issue under the carpet by saying that at least the trains are clean, and with laptops we can still work, even if we are delayed. We prioritise new rolling stock and free wi-fi as part of new franchises, but let us be clear. We cannot just think of these people as passengers stuck in a carriage going nowhere and being a bit annoyed. They are commuters who cannot make it into work due to factors beyond their control, and job insecurity can follow. They are parents unable to get home in time to have dinner with their children or put them to bed, missing out on something so important to their lives.

I would like to take this opportunity to applaud the Government for recognising this issue and not only investing in our railways but committing to reducing the threshold for compensation to 15 minutes from half an hour. The Government are also extending the Consumer Rights Act 2015 to our railways, which will allow for compensation when the service our constituents receive does not meet expectations. I have some thoughts on this matter—particularly on the urgency of implementation, but I will spare the Minister those on this occasion. Much more needs to be done on making it as easy as possible for passengers to receive any compensation they are owed. I hope the Minister will agree that the end point must be commuters automatically receiving compensation when their train is delayed.

Another issue, which is potentially even more frustrating, is that many franchise holders may be profiting from these delays. As I have mentioned, passengers are currently paying twice for delayed trains, not just once. Friends who are using the trains to get to work that is going well are also paying to the train companies they are already buying tickets from. It seems rather extraordinary that people are now paying twice for delayed trains, not just once.

I would like to take this opportunity to applaud the Government for recognising this issue and not only investing in our railways but committing to reducing the threshold for compensation to 15 minutes from half an hour. The Government are also extending the Consumer Rights Act 2015 to our railways, which will allow for compensation when the service our constituents receive does not meet expectations. I have some thoughts on this matter—particularly on the urgency of implementation, but I will spare the Minister those on this occasion. Much more needs to be done on making it as easy as possible for passengers to receive any compensation they are owed. I hope the Minister will agree that the end point must be commuters automatically receiving compensation when their train is delayed.

Another issue, which is potentially even more frustrating, is that many franchise holders may be profiting from these delays. As I have mentioned, passengers are currently able to claim for compensation from train operators when they suffer delays greater than 30 minutes. What many probably do not realise is that Network Rail pays out compensation to train operators whenever there is disruption on the track. That compensation is known as schedule 8 payments. The guidance on those payments states that their purpose is to “compensate train operators for the financial impact of poor performance attributable to Network Rail and other train operators”.

That is not unreasonable; I do not think any of us would believe it is. Given that we do not have vertically integrated lines, Network Rail is responsible for track and signalling. Who would want to take on a franchise if they were financially liable for things beyond their control?

The problem is that there can be a big gap between the amount of compensation train operators receive from Network Rail through schedule 8 payments and the amount of compensation then paid out to passengers for delays. For example, Abellio Greater Anglia—the train operator that runs the line in my constituency—last year received £8.56 million in compensation from Network Rail for disruption. How much did it pay out to passengers for delays that year? Just £2.3 million. That is a subsidy of more than £6 million, and it is not a one-off. East Midlands Trains received £11 million from Network Rail but only paid out £516,000 to passengers. Southeastern received £7.09 million but paid out £1.35 million. Southern, which we know has issues at the moment, received £28.54 million from Network Rail and paid only £1.6 million to passengers. That is nearly a £27 million difference.

I know that train operators would say we cannot compare those figures and that they measure different things, but my response is simple. On seeing the massive subsidies for delays that operators are receiving, the average person will ask, “What incentive do our franchise holders have to push Network Rail to tackle these issues? Why would they demand better infrastructure when they are profiting from my disruption as a commuter?”

As I mentioned, I welcome the Government cutting the threshold for when passengers can receive compensation. However, I truly believe we need further reform. We need to deal with the subsidy for delays.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): May I praise my hon. Friend for securing this debate on an extremely important issue and for the research he has done into the figures? It is essential that we highlight what is effectively a double subsidy. After all, it is a subsidy to Network Rail from the taxpaying population who are using the trains to get to work that is going back to the train companies they are already buying tickets from. It seems rather extraordinary that people are now paying twice for delayed trains, not just once.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend raises a good point. I strongly believe that rail operators should not receive more in schedule 8 payments than their passengers receive in compensation for delays and the cost of handling the disruption, and I have a solution.

One option is to claw back the difference to Network Rail and ring-fence the money for infrastructure improvements in the line, which I am sure the Minister would like. That would tackle the issue by ensuring that the necessary infrastructure was funded and delivered on. However, given that we believe very much in devolution, localism and empowering our constituents, we should ensure that passengers have a say on how the money is used, even if it is not in the form of direct compensation. I suggest that the Government seek to change the terms of our franchise agreements to require that, at the end of every financial year, train operators put any net difference between these amounts into a fund to be controlled by a local railway panel. That panel could be modelled on local highways panels and involve local authorities, businesses and rail passenger groups. It would listen to passengers on how they would like the
extra funds to be used to improve their railway, whether it is through extra benches at stations, cleaner trains, stronger wi-fi or more staff.

I accept that that may not be possible without being subject to judicial review while train operators have existing franchise contracts. Instead, we should make the revised conditions part of all new franchise agreements, coming into effect on each line whenever the franchise comes up for renewal. No one disagrees with Network Rail compensating franchise holders when there are delays due to infrastructure problems, but it is not right that train operating companies are able to receive more money in compensation for delays than they pay out to their passengers. It is a subsidy for failure. We need to stop rail operators profiting from the disruption of passengers’ lives and end the subsidy they are receiving from delays.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): It is the norm for Members to have the permission of the proposer of the motion and the Minister if they wish to speak, but if both are happy, there is time.

Will Quince indicated assent.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): Delighted.

11.9 am

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): My apologies, Mr Evans. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) for securing this debate and permitting me to speak in it.

As the Minister knows, my constituents are currently subject to the most appalling rail services, made catastrophically worse this week by the introduction of the emergency timetable on the Southern railway part of the network, which has seen as many as four out of five trains per hour completely withdrawn from stations in my constituency.

In that context, I would like to raise two issues about compensation. The first relates to the compensation scheme as it currently works for commuter rail services in the metropolitan area in a normal scenario. Even with a reduction to a 15-minute delay for eligibility for compensation, the compensation scheme is still designed for longer journeys. My constituents commuting into central London have a maximum journey time of 25 minutes from the furthest away station in the constituency, so a 30-minute delay is a delay of more than 100% of their scheduled journey time and a 15-minute delay is still a delay of more than 50% of their journey time. In some cases, there has to be a delay double the scheduled journey time before they are eligible for compensation. The compensation scheme needs to be revised in order to be fit for purpose in normal circumstances for commuter rail services in London.

The second issue is the utter inadequacy of compensation arrangements in the context of the current Southern railway emergency timetable. To claim compensation at all, passengers need to demonstrate proof that they have taken the journey that they set out to take. This week in my constituency, all trains stopping on the Southern railway network in my constituency are full. There is no possibility of my constituents taking the trains that they set out to take, because they simply cannot board them. I will add that I was horrified, after reading that Southern rail is advertising a replacement bus service, to learn that no replacement bus service is provided by Southern rail at all. It is asking passengers to get on existing and already overcrowded Transport for London bus services. Essentially, it is just asking passengers to make their journey by any other means possible. My question to the Minister is this: how are my constituents to be compensated in the current context for what is in effect the large-scale withdrawal of commuter rail services from south-east London?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. If my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) will forgive me, I will try to address directly the points made by the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), because of course the Southern rail situation is very much at the front of my mind and the minds of others.

The hon. Lady knows that the emergency timetable was put in place to try to restore some reliability to the services. It was almost impossible for someone to know whether they could actually get on a train and get home, and a decision was taken—I am sorry it has affected the hon. Lady’s constituents in that way—that where there were alternative services, whereby people could make an alternative journey on an additional service, the services would be withdrawn temporarily in order that 85% of the services could run. I was not aware that the replacement bus services to which she referred were actually just an invitation to take a bus journey, so I will certainly take that up, because I had reviewed carefully the planning of alternative provision and was told that it was satisfactory.

The hon. Lady’s point about compensation is well made. From my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister downwards, there have been conversations about how to target compensation for a sustained period of disruption. As the hon. Lady knows, back in April, when we met, performance on the whole network was running at about 84%. That was not good enough, but it was certainly on an upward trend. Since then, a whole series of issues, particularly in relation to industrial action, have caused the service in effect to become completely unreliable. I welcome the company’s commitment to reliability. The determination to get the majority of people to work and home in a more predictable pattern is good, but I take her point about compensation seriously, and although I cannot answer it today, I will certainly come back to her in the weeks ahead.

Let me turn to the substance of my hon. Friend’s debate. I congratulate him, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) did, on once again being an extremely eloquent and well informed presenter of his arguments. He is always a joy to work with and to listen to, and although I may not have all the answers, he certainly always prompts me to work with and to listen to, and although I may not have all the answers, he certainly always prompts me to go away and think even harder about the problems. I am also grateful for the other views that were expressed.

The logic of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester is of course impeccable. When we look at the numbers, it does seem very bizarre that companies are paid...
compensation by Network Rail that they then do not pay out fully to customers. He and I know that behind the very clear logic is a whole series of complicated financial relationships relating to a future earnings hit to franchising, and relating to the fact that many franchises are not in a premium-paying position. They are subsidised by the taxpayer because of the social benefit of rail, so simply to say that the money should automatically be paid out to passengers risks unpicking the financial relationships and contracts that sit behind the railway system today.

However, I completely agree with my hon. Friend that, for too long, people taking train services have been almost treated as an afterthought in the system. One of the things that I have been so pleased to see in my last two years as Minister with responsibility for rail is that customers are being put front and centre of the franchising process. My hon. Friend will know from the current franchise competition on his line of the absolute commitment to delivering a much better service on brand-new trains and contracting for that. It is not contracting for the inputs—"Do you clean your stations; do you buy trains?"—but considering what the service actually looks like for customers. That is the start of a long focus on customer satisfaction that we all need to get to.

I will touch on the technical points about schedule 8 just in case there is one fact that my hon. Friend does not know, although I suspect that is unlikely, given that he is right across this brief. Schedule 8 payments compensate train operators for delays of which Network Rail is the cause. That is a contractual and commercially confidential element set up between Network Rail and each operator, overseen in this case by the regulator, not the Department. It does not include provision for additional costs, so train operators may argue that they pay out almost from a separate pot to compensate for provision of alternative bus services or, indeed, other compensation payments.

The compensation regime across the country is based on the passengers charter. As hon. Members will know, there is a discrepancy between some operators, which pay out on delay repay—I will address later the point about delay repay 30—and those that are still on the national conditions of carriage, which is a slightly less generous regime. Hon. Members will know that the Government are determined to get all franchises on to the same basis through the process of negotiating about franchising. Actually, we want to accelerate that through negotiations and perhaps not just wait for the franchises to come up for renewal. Interestingly, the headline compensation numbers for delay repay show that they are among the most generous in Europe, certainly when compared with other transport systems. People do not get a compensation payment if, for example, their long-distance coach is delayed; they just have to sit there and suck it up.

There was a proposal earlier this year. I was advised that we should have a permanent exemption for the railway industry from the Consumer Rights Act 2015, which I completely rejected. Because the train companies are simply providing customers with a service. In this case, it happens to be taking a train from A to B. There was no logic in providing a permanent exemption, so I have granted basically a one-year grace period for the industry to get itself aligned before that Act comes completely into force. Of course, the work that Nicola Shaw has done for the Department, whereby she proposes aligning Network Rail’s route provision much more closely with the operating companies and joining that up, is another way of ensuring that those companies deliver a much more flexible and responsive service.

Currently, as was pointed out by the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood—I consider the hon. Lady a friend—we have a T-plus-30 trigger point for delay repay, which I hope to be announcing shortly. I am not sure what the average journey time is for the hon. Lady’s constituents, but there is the possibility that it will capture at least some of them. Secondly, the Department has been looking at improving how compensation is paid. For example, compensation used to be paid in vouchers, which seems ridiculous in a world where people use cash or cards. That has been changed so that all passengers can receive compensation in cash instead of in rail vouchers.

We are also very much committed to the idea of automatic compensation, and I want to highlight the work that c2c has done on the Southend lines. It will be of interest to the hon. Lady, because c2c customers who are using its automatic payment card—about 25% of season-ticket holders—start to receive compensation if their train is delayed by even a minute. It is a pence-per-minute deal, so it means that their time is valuable. I think it starts after two minutes of delay—the clock is ticking and they receive compensation—and we want to see that right across the industry. Hon. Members will also be aware that Virgin Trains West Coast has introduced automatic compensation. If someone books a ticket through their website, they do not have to do anything to claim should the train be delayed; the money will automatically come through to their account.

There has been a lot of progress in the industry on compensation, but I absolutely recognise the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester has made. I am very keen to think about—either through franchising or through some of the alternative structures that Nicola Shaw suggested—how we can hold money that is paid out for poor performance in a way that targets it more specifically towards improvements on the line. My hon. Friend knows that I am sympathetic to the spirit of his proposal. It is a question of how we make it work in the often byzantine world of current railway structures.

Ultimately, what customers want is not to have to faff around with compensation claims; they want a reliable service that they can depend on to get to work and to get home. A major change that we are starting to see is about capturing the value of that reliability. I hope hon. Friends and hon. Members in the Chamber will have noticed the move among those in the industry to stop talking about punctuality as a train that arrives between five and 10 minutes late, focusing instead on the “right time”. If we arrive 10 minutes late to a debate, we are late, even though, in train terms, we are perfectly on
time and everything is normal. I want to flag up the recent industry-led proposals to move to a “right time” railway and to measure performance and compensation claims from the “right time”, which the industry is moving rapidly to introduce. Ultimately, we want a “right time” railway, where people are confident in its reliability. That is what is driving this Government’s record investment in rail, but I am very sympathetic to all the points that have been made today, because if customers do not see and feel that benefit, we are not all collectively doing our job.

Question put and agreed to.

11.21 am

Sitting suspended.

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**North Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust**

[Valerie Vaz in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the performance of North Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. North Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust serves two thirds of my constituency and more than 350,000 people living in Enfield, Haringey and the surrounding areas. I am grateful for the opportunity to bring this important matter before the House.

The situation at the hospital is, frankly, a scandal. It operates the busiest emergency department in London, which is attended by more than 500 people a day, yet the Care Quality Commission has rated safety at the emergency department as inadequate. Medical care, including older people’s care, at the hospital also requires extensive and immediate improvement. The senior leadership team at the trust and the Government have serious questions to answer about how patient safety at North Mid has been allowed to have been put at grave risk.

What has been happening at the hospital has major implications for my constituents, for residents in north London and for health services across the capital and beyond. My speech will consider all those issues and the steps that need to be taken to ensure the safety of patients and the quality of care. I will call on the Government to give assurances that services at the hospital, including those provided by the accident and emergency department, will be protected and improved in the short and long term.

Before I get to the heart of the matter, I should make two important points. First, the many concerns and criticisms that I will raise about what has happened at the hospital are not directed at the front-line staff—the doctors, nurses and trainees who work there. They are overworked and under-resourced, and have been doing a challenging job in incredibly difficult circumstances. The CQC has made it clear that:

“Most staff were competent and endeavoured to provide good care and outcomes for patients.”

However, just like the patients, the front-line staff have been badly let down by poor management and a lack of leadership at the hospital, and by the Government’s health policies over the past six years, which have left the national health service on its knees.

My second point is one that I believe is shared by all London MPs whose constituents have been affected by the performance of the hospital. Although all of us have raised concerns about how North Mid has been operating, we were not made aware of the true extent of the crisis at the hospital until the CQC issued a warning notice at the beginning of June, requiring the trust significantly to improve the treatment of patients attending the A&E. That was almost two full months after its unannounced inspection of the hospital in April.

Many recent revelations about the chaos at North Mid have been exposed only because of the press via leaked documents, yet it appears that the terrible situation has been an open secret in health circles for a significant period of time.
Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I hesitate to interrupt my right hon. Friend, who is laying out the story so comprehensively. Is she as concerned as I am that many health professionals knew what was going on, but that MPs in the three boroughs covered by the trust were kept in the dark?

Joan Ryan: That was exactly the case and I am very concerned. It is not an exaggeration to say we were kept in the dark. All of us across Enfield and Haringey have, over the past year, raised the issue of North Mid in the Chamber at a local level and with Ministers at various times. We received no information until a recent meeting with the Minister, who, I am pleased to say, is here today. Prior to that, there was almost no answer to the points that we raised, other than to brush them aside with answers such as how much better the NHS is doing now than ever before. The phrase “kept in the dark” absolutely covers the situation, with those in the know including the likes of NHS Improvement, NHS England, the General Medical Council, Health Education England and, no doubt, the Department of Health. However, but for the actions of the General Medical Council and Health Education England, the situation for patient safety could be even worse.

I have had a number of meetings with the senior leadership teams at North Mid and at the Enfield clinical commissioning group, and many of the problems I was discussing were not thought noteworthy enough to bring to my attention. If they were brought to my attention, the exposure of those problems was minimal, such that they did not raise the alarm bells that they should have.

In May, the severity of the situation at the hospital was discussed at a high-risk summit, involving several north London hospital trusts, clinicians and other stakeholders. MPs were not even informed that the summit was happening, never mind informed of the outcomes. I would be interested to know whether the Minister thinks that that state of affairs is acceptable given that our constituents have to suffer the consequences of the failures at the hospital. Even as of today, despite numerous requests, we have received no minutes of the high-risk summit and no account of what was discussed in any detail whatever.

Would the Government be willing to bring in early warning measures to ensure that MPs and clinicians are kept properly informed about impending healthcare crises in their communities, rather than being notified after the crisis has hit? To do our job on behalf of our constituents—to safeguard their safety and interests in the use of and access to one of the most important public services any of us can imagine—we need some kind of early warning system. It is clear that very many people knew about the situation, but nobody who is accountable to the public at a local level was properly informed. I look forward to the Minister’s response to that point.

I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) in her place, as the hospital is just inside her constituency, although it serves a large number of my constituents and constituents from Hornsey and Wood Green. I think it also serves practically the whole of Tottenham—my right hon. Friend for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) is in his place, as is the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes).

I am pleased to say that we have been working cross-party on the issue. Frankly, I will work with anyone—other hon. Members involved would do the same—who is willing to put the hospital first.

The CQC’s damning report into North Mid was published on Wednesday 6 July, and its inspection of the emergency department and two medical wards at the hospital was in response to a “number of serious incidents…which had raised concerns about the standards of care”.

Between March 2015 and March 2016, there were 22 cases at North Mid’s A&E department where patients experienced serious or permanent harm or alleged abuse, or where a service provision was threatened. The CQC found that people were waiting far too long to be assessed on first arriving at the hospital, to see a doctor and to be moved to specialist wards in the hospital. The main experience of anybody turning up at the hospital’s emergency department was to wait, wait and then wait again.

The report tells of a lack of respect and dignity in how patients were treated, including a time when there was only “one commode available in the whole of the ED”—emergency department—“to serve over 100 patients.”

Most people reading this will find that shocking.

Resources had been so stretched that, by the time the CQC issued its warning notice to the hospital in June, only seven of 15 emergency department consultants were in post, and seven of 13 middle-grade emergency doctors. As a consequence, junior doctors and medical trainees have been left unsupported by senior staff in A&E at night, including in emergency paediatric care. Junior doctors have been asked to perform tasks for which they are not yet qualified, and there have even been reports of receptionists with no medical training being used to triage patients, at least to the extent of deciding whether they should go to urgent care or the emergency department.

In February, A&E staff were so overwhelmed that patients, many of whom had already been waiting for hours, were told that they should go home unless they thought their illness was life-threatening. How can anyone be expected to know how ill they are without seeing a doctor? We have self-service checkouts in our supermarkets, but self-service A&E? I think not.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for securing the debate. Even though the hospital is not in my constituency, much of what she describes happens in hospitals in my constituency and just outside it. At Central Middlesex hospital, which is just outside my constituency but serves many of my constituents, healthcare provision has also been affected by cuts. A recent inspection by the CQC similar to the one that she is describing highlighted a lack of experienced medics for seriously ill patients. Does she agree that such staff shortages threaten patient safety?

Joan Ryan: I do indeed, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. One point that I argue most strongly is that, although the MPs concerned are banding together to defend our hospital and fight for adequate and safe service, it is obvious that this is not
just about North Mid—North Mid is just the first point where the crisis has hit. This is an issue around outer London, across London and probably nationally, particularly for district general hospitals.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has secured this debate, which resonates across London and probably outside it. We recognise the point about waiting, especially in ambulances outside hospitals. People are waiting for up to four hours and then being admitted just before the four-hour mark, so that it is not registered against the time limit, and then waiting again. That is happening even before the planned closures of accident and emergency departments. As one clinician said to me just today, there is no credible clinical evidence that out-of-hospital services can deliver on the scale necessary, but that is all we are being offered as an alternative.

Joan Ryan: I agree with my hon. Friend. Again, that demonstrates that this is not just about North Mid; it is just that North Mid has reached the crisis point before anywhere else.

The CQC has also raised concerns about the lack of equipment within the department, from missing monitors and missing leads for cardiac machines to trolleys in resuscitation rooms that are not fully equipped. I cannot imagine the distress of a patient with chest pains who is connected to a cardiac machine to monitor their progress, only to find that the staff member cannot connect it up to get an instant read-out because the leads are not there. Even a chute meant to carry specimens from the emergency department to the pathology unit was out of operation for six whole weeks. According to the CQC, “this caused major delays to the speed in which results were returned to the department, thus slowing down the time in which some patients could be treated.”

That is unacceptable.

All those problems have been exacerbated by a lack of effective clinical leadership and a culture of bullying at the hospital, meaning that staff do not feel confident in raising concerns and have even “stopped reporting incidents of staff shortage as management had not responded to them in the past”.

A quality visit report by Health Education England from March 2016 found that none of the medical trainees interviewed would recommend the emergency department to their family and friends for treatment, principally because they felt that the department was unsafe. The postgraduate trainee junior doctors at the hospital would not themselves recommend the hospital or the emergency department to their family and friends—what an indictment.

The General Medical Council, which oversees the standard of training for doctors, has threatened to ban North Mid from providing postgraduate training because standards have been so poor. The loss of junior doctors would leave the A&E so badly understaffed that it would effectively close. The future of North Mid’s emergency department is at risk.

I note that the chief inspector of hospitals—Professor Sir Mike Richards, whom a number of us are due to meet tomorrow—has said that since the CQC’s inspection in April, “some progress” has been made to improve the situation, although there is “still much more that needs to be done.”

A new clinical leadership team has been put in place, and there have been moves to appoint more senior doctors. However, in almost every instance, the new appointments are short-term, with the doctors taken on loan from other hard-pressed local hospitals for up to six months. The situation is safe at the moment, given the number of doctors in the A&E, but the measures are only a sticking plaster, as many of the doctors are on a three to six-month loan. What measures are the Government willing to put in place to support North Mid and ensure that it has the consultants and doctors it requires on a permanent, long-term basis?

The CQC also states that North Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust “has supplied an action plan setting out the steps it will take to address the concerns identified in the Warning Notice and report.” Does the Minister agree that the action plan should be published in full and updated regularly with the measures taken to improve patient safety at the hospital?

Tellingly, the CQC says that previous serious incident investigations and subsequent action plans at the hospital have not always been shared with staff in a timely manner, which has “meant that in certain circumstances, reports were received when actions should already have been taken in order to mitigate against a future occurrence.”

Given the analysis of how things have been kept in the dark, which we have explored, and that statement from the CQC, the Minister will understand why I ask for a fully published action plan and regular reports on progress. This is about implementation and outcomes.

Surely the Minister will understand that without full transparency, many of my constituents and those of my colleagues who are here today will have little confidence that the required improvements have been made and are being sustained. As I said earlier, the trust’s shocking mismanagement and poor leadership have played a big part in creating the mess at North Mid, but the chief executive, who I understand is stepping down, is not solely responsible for what has happened. The Government cannot be let off the hook when they have done so much to undermine healthcare provision in Enfield.

The tipping point for the crisis at North Mid was the closure of the A&E department at Chase Farm hospital in my constituency. In 2007, the then Leader of the Opposition—the current Prime Minister, for now—posed outside Chase Farm hospital and promised to protect the emergency department on site. By 2013, his Conservative-led Government had ripped the heart out of the hospital, closing both the A&E unit and the maternity services. It went from a 480-bed hospital to one with 48 surgical beds. Those of us who campaigned against the closure at the time said that the decision would put huge pressure on North Middlesex hospital, Barnet hospital, our ambulance services and GP surgeries right across Enfield. We were right.

Andy Slaughter: My right hon. Friend describes exactly our experience in west London, where two A&E departments have closed and two more are intended to close, despite assurances having been given that they would not. We have heard nothing at all since February 2013 about what those plans will be. I was told just this week that the next report is not going to be in September,
so until another report is done we will not know exactly what services there will be. People are waiting in limbo for years, and meanwhile there is a drain of staff and expertise from hospitals, so their closure becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Joan Ryan: And that is exactly what happened at Chase Farm hospital. It was under threat for so long that it had no stability and it was no longer an attractive place for staff because they had no security. I hope I am wrong, but my fear is that in cases such as my hon. Friend outlines, no news is definitely not good news.

One year after the closure of Chase Farm’s A&E department, the CQC reported that services at North Mid were struggling with the additional workload. We know now that the hospital has had to manage an increase in A&E patients of between 20% and 25% as a result. That is unmanageable and unsustainable for an A&E department; many would bend, if not break, if put under such strain. The situation was so bad that by February 2016 only 67% of patients were seen and treated within the national four-hour target at North Mid, compared with an average of 88% across England.

Our local health services and the emergency department at North Mid would have been better placed to cope with the closure of Chase Farm’s A&E department if other promises to improve primary care had been fulfilled. In November 2013, the Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box and said:

“Enfield is... getting an increase in primary care funding. That is part of our plan of not cutting but expanding our NHS.”—[Official Report, 20 November 2013; Vol. 570, c. 1226.]

But many people in Enfield find it really hard to get a doctor’s appointment when they need one. Over the last six years, 12 doctors’ surgeries in Enfield have closed and only one new practice has opened. That is why, even though Enfield is now the fourth-biggest borough in London, we have fewer GPs per head than almost anywhere in the capital. That situation is not sustainable.

Will the Minister join me in calling for a proper plan for at least 84 more GPs in Enfield over the next four years, as recommended by the Royal College of General Practitioners? Will he support my calls to improve health funding across the board in Enfield? As he will know, Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health Trust anticipates a £13 million deficit by 2016-17; Enfield Council needs to deliver a saving of £24 million in adult social care by 2020 because of reductions in funding from central Government; and per capita spending on public health in Enfield is only £43 this year, far lower than the average across London and in England. Given that cutting preventive services piles pressure on hospitals, does he seriously believe that allowing the current situation to continue will take the strain off North Mid—or will it in fact do the exact opposite?

It should come as no surprise that I and many of my constituents have very little faith that the NHS is safe in the Government’s hands. The financial crisis in the NHS is a major reason why North Mid did not have enough equipment, consultants, doctors and nurses to cope with demand. The inability to recruit permanent staff has meant that many hospitals, including North Mid, have been forced to drain their resources on expensive agency workers and locums. One might have thought that, in the light of such a crisis, the Government would be bending over backwards to encourage people to join the medical profession—but no. Instead we are witnessing the sorry situation of a Government fighting with junior doctors over contracts and removing bursaries for nurses. What a slap in the face for the future front-line staff we so desperately need.

The Government also plan to make £22 billion of efficiency savings by 2020. I know that savings must be found, particularly in back-office services, but efficiencies on such a scale simply cannot be achieved without putting patient care at risk. I am also concerned that the Government’s methods to implement those cuts—described using woolly phrases like “the rationalisation of clinical facilities”, “the consolidation of trusts” or “the introduction of transformation and sustainability plans”—will result in takeovers, mergers and the downgrading of services. Even before the crisis at North Mid was revealed, plans were already afoot to launch an NHS pilot programme, involving the Royal Free London NHS Trust, to look at options to link hospitals including North Mid together and to merge clinical and support services. At the same time that it was announced that the chief executive of North Mid was going on leave, we learned that an acting chief executive was being appointed from the trust and that David Sloman, the trust’s chief executive—a very good chief executive, I might add—would be taking on the role of accountable officer on an interim basis. I fear for the future of service provision at North Mid as a consequence.

Local residents remember to their cost that the A&E and maternity units at Chase Farm were shut only a few months before the Royal Free London NHS Trust took over Barnet and Chase Farm hospitals in 2014. Chase Farm has been left as little more than a cottage hospital. North Mid cannot suffer the same fate; that would have terrible consequences for health services across North London. Think how much further people in Enfield would have to travel to get emergency hospital treatment, and how much pressure it would put on A&E departments at hospitals such as University College hospital in Euston, Barnet hospital and the Royal Free hospital in Hampstead.

What assurances will the Minister give my constituents, first that North Middlesex hospital will not be taken over by the Royal Free London NHS Trust by stealth, using this crisis as the back door to a merger; secondly, that constituents will be consulted fully on all future proposals for North Mid; and thirdly and most importantly, that its key services will be protected and improved in the short and long term? The performance of North Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust must be a wake-up call for the Government. I urge the Minister to use every tool at his disposal to help North Mid make the immediate improvements required in the quality of care provided to patients. The Government must ensure that the hospital and our health services have the funding and support they need so that this situation never happens again. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

2.58 pm

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, which is vital for my constituents and for all those around Enfield and Haringey. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Enfield, North (Joan Ryan) for securing it and for presenting a comprehensive case for the need for urgent action and reassurance for our constituents about the sustainable
future of North Middlesex hospital. She has tempted me on to a political path: plainly this is a cross-party concern and call for action, but mention was made of the outgoing Prime Minister. I remember reminding a previous outgoing Prime Minister, Mr Blair, at his last Prime Minister’s questions—those are now coming up for the current Prime Minister—that he had said that there were “24 hours to save the NHS”, but that his Government had decided to downgrade Chase Farm hospital. There is a lot of history to this, but I will avoid, if I can, being tempted down that route.

I believe that, because of the Government’s investment, Chase Farm and the Royal Free hospitals have a secure future that is not shackled by the private finance initiative deals that have severely affected Barnet and North Middlesex hospitals. In terms of resources, they are paying a big mortgage, and in relation to finances they have been chasing their tail. Sadly, A&E has been part of that tail. In April, the hospital was whacked with a £320,000 financial penalty, which made a significant dent in its finances and contributed significantly to the £8.3 million deficit with which it is struggling to deal.

The issue is with the A&E. I want reassurances from the Government that someone will take responsibility and action will be taken. Many of us have been expressing concern about local A&E provision for far too long. The concern is that responsibility has not been taken and there has been no proper action. In short, how bad does it have to get before someone takes responsibility and action is taken?

Like the right hon. Member for Enfield North, I pay tribute to staff. We all do. There are obviously great, dedicated staff. Many of us will know them—they are friends and people we know locally. They are as concerned about what is happening as anyone else. Later in my speech, I will say a little more about my experience as a patient in the A&E department two years ago. I saw things for myself, and there are regular reports. The Care Quality Commission made particular reference to the “caring and compassionate” work and service of staff. The current situation is letting them down.

Health Education England and the General Medical Council said that, as much as there was a duty of care to patients, there was a duty of care to doctors training at the hospital, which was why there was such profound, extraordinary, exceptional concern that they reached the point of threatening to pull doctors out. We know that that threat will not be realised, that a corner has been turned and action taken, but why did it take this long for such urgent, expensive crisis management to take place? There were earlier warning signals, so why was there no proper plan?

It is all very well having a new programme calling for “safer, faster, better” services, but for goodness’ sake our constituents expect a safer, faster, better service without a new programme having to be put together, no doubt in glossy print and at considerable expense. They expect a basic service, not a new programme. They have been expecting that for far too long and have been let down.

The 10-year context is important. Despite some interruptions, we can all testify to that 10-year journey. It is so very frustrating because the context is positive: the journey of the Barnet, Enfield and Haringey clinical strategy since 2005-06. We can have our criticisms and our campaigns, but the context is London’s biggest reorganisation of acute services in more than a decade, which was inevitably going to be a challenge. It inevitably needed a careful plan and serious clinical leadership—not just proper clinical leadership in secondary care and the appropriate number of consultants and middle-grade doctors, but the appropriate primary care. Those of us who were involved in the discussions heard the promises from Sir George Alberti, and the talk about bridging loans and the pump priming of primary care, which was also necessary. Sadly, we are seeing the lack of all those things at the same time.

Nevertheless, North Middlesex hospital has been physically transformed since 2009, when it was mostly old Victorian buildings that were not fit for purpose. Those buildings were demolished and a new £123 million modern hospital took shape. That was incredibly welcome, as was the added investment. Some £80 million of public funds was invested to provide the new facilities in line with the reorganisation in the BEH strategy. The plan was, quite properly, to modernise the older facilities, and the hospital has been visibly transformed. Sadly, though, the service that has been provided to constituents has not matched the modern facilities from which they are now able to benefit.

North Middlesex has become one of the busiest A&E departments in the capital, so it is plain that no one can afford it to close. I know the Minister can counter the suggestion that there is any risk of closure, and I am sure he will reassure us that it will not close in any way, that there will be no partial closure and that it will continue, with a long-term, sustainable future. Nevertheless, the concern is why, with all that investment having gone in—initially private finance initiative investment, then direct taxpayer-funded investment—it has taken until this point, so far down the line, for regulators to be able to tell everyone what we all knew far earlier.

I have read the trust’s minutes from 26 May, which state:

“Since the problems first surfaced last year, we have been open with our health partners about the challenges and have worked closely with them to tackle the many interlinked contributory factors, both internally and in the local health care system.”

Well, the problems did not first surface in 2015. I was a patient two years ago and saw for myself that there were problems when I was sitting on a trolley for 11 or 12 hours and was missed by very busy, overstretched staff who were dealing with so many patients. It was an ordinary summer’s day in June—not a winter’s day—and there were more than 400 patients. The staff were absolutely overstretched and missed my CT scan. Lo and behold, my appendix burst. It could have been fatal. That happened because no one was available to take any responsibility for what was happening.

There was real concern about the leadership of staff who were overstretched. I raised the alarm then, as did others. Indeed, the CQC happened to be inspecting the A&E on the very weekend I was sitting on that trolley and seeing for myself the huge challenges it faced. The CQC said that the A&E required improvements. Its report recognised that the hospital was fully embracing the reconfiguration of services, but also said:

“While the hospital had achieved much in absorbing increased numbers of patients, its infrastructure of staffing levels, training provision, complaints handling and governance had been stretched, and there had been an underestimate of the resources needed to maintain services at the current level.”
The warning signals had gone out. Why was prompt action not taken to provide sufficient numbers of consultants and middle-grade doctors?

On Chase Farm hospital, one of the bottom lines for the reconfiguration was the fact that, true to the Prime Minister’s words, we had a moratorium and delayed the previous Government’s plans. All options were looked at, but it came back to the unanimous clinical advice from the local doctors and others, who said that it was in the best interest of the patients for the reconfiguration to take place. Why? They referred particularly to the lack of consultants and middle-grade doctors. That meant that Chase Farm had to be downgraded and A&E patients referred to Barnet and to North Middlesex.

How can it have come to pass that, three years later, we are still hearing the same excuse—that there are not enough consultants or middle-grade doctors? It is completely unacceptable. Why is the system not reacting quicker? Whoever the system is—whether it is the chief executives of the trust or the ever-changing roll-call of interim managers and directors of NHS Improvement, NHS London or NHS England, or, indeed, Ministers themselves—has it taken so long with the regulators threatening to pull out doctors, for everyone to pull out their fingers and turn the corner that has now been turned? It is not good enough.

Without my permission—there was a leak—the Daily Mail did a big splash on my experience, and there has been tension ever since about other very serious incidents, some of which have already been mentioned. There was the awful example of someone who had died being left unattended for four hours. There were other shocking and deplorable incidents. Staff themselves see it as something that shames them as well. Managers say to me, “Why hasn’t more action been taken?”

Until July 2015, the A&E department, which is in a very challenging London hospital, was performing relatively well against the standard of seeing and admitting or discharging 95% of patients within four hours. In the first four months of 2015-16, the hospital continued at 94% to 95%. We have to recognise that it has undergone extraordinary growth. Compared with 2013, before the BEH changes were implemented, the hospital now has 25% more staff, cares for 19% more patients, admits 44% more patients, undertakes 44% more surgical operations and procedures, sees 27% more patients in outpatients, and delivers 37% more babies. Yes, all of that is happening.

Of course, performance dipped in other trusts in the country and the downturn continued in January 2016, but when it reached a low of 66%—yes, it recovered slightly to 70%—why were those signals not heeded? How could it get to that level and no urgent action is taken? It was mentioned by hon. Members and others at the time, so why was urgent action not taken? Why? Somebody was not ready to seize it and say, “We are not going to wait for these regulators, the CQC, to come and tell us down the line that it is inadequate, or for the HEE and GMC to say it is not even safe for doctors, let alone for patients?” Why did it take so long? How bad does it have to get? Why does our health service have to get to this stage for prompt action to be taken?

Many of us could have said that it was not just about secondary care, but about primary care as well. The right hon. Member for Enfield North has made that point already. I referred to the issue of a tale of two health cities within London. Compared with the Camdens and IslINGTONs of this world, we are very much the poor relations. We are 25% poor. We have had meetings with Ministers about mental health provision, and we have pressed the Minister about the need to ensure fair funding for London. We must get that. We have got this sustainability and transformation plan. It is another siren call. There will be other problems down the line on mental health and other issues affecting our constituents unless the Government and NHS England London ensure that we get fair funding.

The Government have put in a new fair funding formula, but it is taking far too long. We do not need to listen to the Public Accounts Committee to tell us it is taking too long—we can listen to patients, to this debate now and to the regulators. Although in the round our health economy is not all about resources, they have a big impact, particularly in primary care. Why does the health trust have to go through a financial penalty system? Another £130,000 was taken away in April, so more money is taken away from the system when there is a cry for help.

The chief executive, who has gone on leave or has left, made a plea for help over many years. We were all making a plea for help. Why has the NHS not done more about it? It is totally unacceptable for us to be in this position here with this debate. I know from our meetings that the Minister is holding the NHS to the fire now, but why were feet not held to the fire years ago to ensure that people took responsibility? Yes, they could have lost their jobs, but there could have been proper clinical leadership that did not let down our patients in Enfield.

I look forward to the Minister giving us every assurance that there is, as I believe there is, a long-term sustainable future for the A&E at North Middlesex. We cannot afford to lose it and I am sure we will not. The CQC tells us that a corner has been turned, but it was far too long in coming. I want the Minister’s assurance on consultants, although I understand there is a national crisis in getting consultants on the ground, particularly in emergency departments. I want to ensure that the Government will fix it to ensure there is every financial incentive for the right number of consultants and middle-grade doctors to come to Enfield to ensure we have the A&E service that our constituents need and deserve.

3.13 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. The hospital serves almost the entirety of the constituency of Tottenham and has done so since the closure of the Prince of Wales hospital in my constituency in the 1980s. It is important to emphasise that North Middlesex hospital is located in a strategically essential area. It serves not only the boroughs of Enfield and Haringey, but some of Barnet and Waltham Forest. Many years ago, when I was a Minister for Health, a neighbouring hospital, Whips Cross, was a general hospital that on occasion struggled considerably with its emergency department, so I cannot emphasise enough that it is critical for the broader health economy of north-east London that the North Middlesex survives, flourishes and does well.
The concern that has been raised in this Chamber is really about how the situation has got to this stage over such a length of time, with so many Members of Parliament ringing alarm bells in a context where all of us have privately said, “We must tread carefully. We don’t want to talk down the hospital.” We say, “The chief exec seems to be…” as we whisper among ourselves. We do not want to talk down the hospital, but it has now got to the point at which we have to be absolutely frank about what has been happening at that trust, as we have heard, and we must ask some very hard questions about what has been going on.

I hope that the Minister will assist me on this point. There have been successive risk summits, meetings have been held, and the chief exec has asked for support, but I am not clear why support was not provided. In the old days, Members of Parliament would have been able to contact the strategic health authority and there would have been a clear line of leadership. We literally had two bodies to deal with: the strategic health authority and the chief executive of the trust. Frankly, chief executives went if they were not up to the job, and emergency teams were brought in to run the hospital. I did that as a Minister responsible for emergency care. I saw it happen in a range of trusts across the country as, under the Tony Blair Government, we pushed for the first targets of four-hour waits. I am struggling to understand how things have got to this level.

Life expectancy in a constituency such as mine is among the lowest in the country: men reach 74, six years behind the average life expectancy. We have homelessness and we have had two riots in a generation.

The issues are clear, but what is not clear is who was in charge? Why were meetings held in successive years? What is the role of NHS Improvement? Is it ever the case that anyone there would contact a Member of Parliament to say what they are doing to improve a trust? What is the role of NHS England’s London office? The individuals there are paid a hell of a lot of money—hundreds of thousands of pounds. Have they got a responsibility to contact a Member of Parliament to ask for a meeting or a conference call to speak to us about what is happening in the trust?

What is the role of Health Education England, which has been concerned about training and qualifications? We know the role of the General Medical Council, but has it been nobbled not to withdraw doctors by NHS England or any other body? What we have are numerous quangos. I have not even mentioned the clinical commissioning group. We have CCGs, HEE, NHS Improvement, NHS England London and the chief executive. The Government came into office determined to reduce the number of bureaucrats, but—my God!—each of us has at least 10 or 12. Then there are all the staff that work under them. Meetings have been held, but what has been done?

I have done the Minister’s job, so I feel for him. When I did his job, we did a lot of the running of the NHS from Whitehall. The Minister’s party came in and I understand why they said they could not run it from Whitehall, but we now have all these bodies and I am not clear what they have done. As a former Minister, I want to hear more of what they have been up to. I hope that the Minister will answer the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan). Given that there have been CQC reports—the one that we had on the 6th is not the first—and risk summits, what is the obligation to inform Members of Parliament and therefore our constituents? At what point does that kick in? Or is it expected that that should be done solely by the trust? If it is, that is problematic if it is a failing trust in which the chief executive has been put on emergency leave. I have the CQC report before me and it says that safety at the hospital is inadequate, and so is responsiveness. As to whether it is well led—leadership is also inadequate, which is presumably why the chief executive has been put on emergency leave. Overall the hospital is inadequate. Under the headings of caring and effectiveness, it requires improvement. That is pretty damning. It does not get much worse than that.

Many hon. Members are concerned—and my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North, the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) and I certainly are, having been around for a few years. We campaigned to get the PFI that put millions—I think it was £150 million—into building a brand new hospital. It is therefore deeply frustrating that we now have such an uphill struggle. Chase Farm has been mentioned and I will not discuss it again, but the Minister will recognise that we all rang alarm bells about the implications of closing emergency there. Money was put into the trust; yet it has got to its present situation.

I heard yesterday about the case of Mrs Alice Morfett, a 92-year-old lady who still went shopping in Morrisons. She had a heart operation in Barts and she was recuperating on the T3 ward. In the morning she told her daughter about her concern about a male nurse’s behaviour; she could not understand why he kept wanting to touch her chest. Her daughter said she did not believe Mrs Morfett and thought the anaesthetic had not worn off, but her mother complained about the nurse rubbing against her chest. After that Mrs Morfett was scared to ask for help. No one was summoned to help her. The next day, after an hour of asking for someone to take her to the toilet, Mrs Morfett tried to get out of bed herself and she fell. She ended up with huge open wounds; my constituent sent me a photo of the terrible wounds her mother suffered. Mrs Morfett died a couple of weeks later, and her daughter believes that she died as a result of her injuries. Mrs Morfett said to her daughter, “Please don’t let them get away with it; they have to pay for what they’ve done to me.” I do not lightly raise constituency case work in this way. I have used this letter because it is the latest one I have in a stream of letters from constituents about what is happening in the trust.

Joan Ryan: Such incidents are what the CQC calls “never” events because they should never happen: a patient dies, and it is not necessarily from medical issues or natural causes. I am sure that my right hon. Friend knows that the CQC report notes that one patient lay dead in a cubicle for four and a half hours last December because there were not enough doctors even to do the hourly rounds. It does not get much worse than that.

Mr Lammy: No, it does not, and that cuts to the critical issue of safety at the hospital. In fact, the problems at the hospital have been going on for well over two years. What happened to the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate, who lay in the hospital with a burst appendix and who frankly would not be here but for a
stroke of luck, says it all. How have we got to the situation where the local Member of Parliament is about to die of a medical emergency after waiting without being seen for 11 hours? He has been friendly—

[Interruption.] Well, that is what happens with a burst appendix. The hon. Gentleman is looking well, but he is not that young. People die of a burst appendix if they are not treated.

Mr Burrowes: Perhaps it is an issue of profile, but they did not know I was the Member of Parliament. I kept it quiet and was there as an ordinary patient—which is the point. It was only when they found out 11 hours on, following some communication that I was the Member of Parliament, that, lo and behold, the seniors all came down and had a look, and saw what was going on. It was actually my mother who was banging on the desk saying, “Why aren’t you getting a scan for my son?” That is what it takes—it is the ordinary experience of any patient, who, sadly, may not have their mother there to badger the staff for them. That is the patient safety concern.

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman took the business of mystery shopping a little far, but his encounter was well reported locally, and at that time alarm bells were being rung. By my recollection it was a good couple of years ago.

The CQC report confirms what we all long feared—that the closure of the emergency department at Chase Farm hospital in December 2013 had a significant impact on demand at North Middlesex hospital. Concerns were also raised about doctors training in anaesthetics, and they were removed from training in the hospital in April 2015, and have never returned to it because the GMC was so concerned. I wrote to the Secretary of State for Health on 22 March—four months ago. I did not get a reply. I am grateful to have seen the Minister eventually, a couple of weeks ago; but he can see why I am concerned when, after failures of the kind we have heard about in the debate, the Secretary of State did not reply to me in March. I will gently say that a hospital where alarm bells are ringing about such issues would have commanded the attention of the Secretary of State in the past, under successive Governments. Certainly MPs and local authority leaders would have been called together and the issue would have been addressed. I raise the matter in the gentlest of ways, because I am afraid that they actually might kill her if I don’t tell them.

Many issues have been raised and other hon. Members want to contribute; and we want to hear from the shadow Minister, too. The bottom line is that we are very concerned that the hospital has reached the state it has, given the investment that has gone into it. Week after week there are complaints from constituents. Yes, the leadership has now changed. It is important that local governance and the hospital’s relationship with Enfield and the London Borough of Haringey should be retained; but we want to hear from the Minister that such things cannot happen again. It is a question of who is accountable, and when, and of how Members of Parliament could have been heard much more constructively. Given all that happened at Mid Staffordshire, it is a matter of deep concern that although things are clearly not quite at that stage, they could have reached it had leaks not been published in The Guardian and had MPs such as my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North not rung alarm bells as they have in the past few weeks.

3.27 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) on securing the debate. It feels a bit like mark 2 for her, I think, given the earlier experiences with Chase Farm. I am pleased about the cross-party nature of the debate; it was interesting to hear the personal experience of the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) of care at the hospital.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), I am at a loss; I attended the annual general meeting a couple of weeks ago and have written letters to Ministers—indeed, the Minister present today has been kind enough to have a meeting with us. We have had press reports and urgent questions. We have asked questions at Prime Minister’s questions. We have had Adjournment debates, and the Mayor of London has, raised the matter with NHS London. I am at a loss to know what we should do next, and which levers can be pulled.

I am pleased that management action has been taken, and that Mr Sloman has now taken an interest and is the accountable officer. I am equally pleased that Ms McManus has been brought in to take over on an emergency basis while the leadership of the hospital is being looked at. However, I have concerns for the long term about a situation in which decision makers in Hampstead would make decisions about a north London hospital whose area is Edmonton, Tottenham, Wood Green, Enfield and Haringey. I am concerned about how remote and out of touch they might be. I look forward to hearing in the spring what the management arrangements will be for the medium to long term. We must ensure that there is proper representation of local people at board level and a proper voice for our area in the hospital management and governance structure.

I will briefly raise two constituency cases. One is about medicines training, which was referred to in the Care Quality Commission’s report. I understand from a constituent that when her father was discharged from the hospital, somehow his name had got mixed up with another patient’s name, and when she got home she had the incorrect medicine for him. That is a basic error; and the wrong medicine could have been fatal for an elderly and frail man.

The second case arose after an anonymous phone call to my office reporting on the condition of an elderly patient. The caller was very distressed, as the patient was his elderly wife. He said, “I’m so worried to tell you, because I am afraid that they actually might kill her if I tell you her name.” There is a level of desperation, and that call was made not so long ago; it was within the last month.

There are some general lessons to be learned from this specific situation about the lack of leadership and lack of quality control in our public services. The first is about the recruitment and retention of properly qualified
staff. We desperately need to tackle the low morale of staff, which has been exacerbated by the poor handling of the junior doctors dispute. Morale is low not only at senior level or consultant level but at the middle level, and even at the level of junior doctors. Once the hospital lost the contract for the training of junior doctors, everything went downhill from there. We need to get that training back, and we need to work very hard and very quickly to get back the doctors and experts who want to serve, learn and train in a university hospital.

The second lesson to learn is about the crucial issues in our health economy, one of which is the problems with primary care. I understand that there are immense problems with the current Enfield primary care arrangements. The clinical commissioning group is not in a good place. I would like to hear about any associated issues, and I would like to know what levers the Minister can pull to ensure that proper primary care arrangements are put in place for Enfield and that primary care in Haringey is strengthened.

I understand that Haringey has done some very good things, including putting some extra general practitioners into the accident and emergency department to educate people about where to go when they first come into hospital, and about how they can go and see their GP in the local community. I would be happy to hear about an evaluation of that programme and whether it has been helpful. Rather than rushing in with a band-aid solution, can we hear back about that programme? What has the evaluation been, and what do the experts think? Has that programme stopped the flow of people coming—perhaps incorrectly—to A&E, and has it helped the primary care health economy?

It is well known that Members including my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham secured a debate in the main Chamber on mental health in Haringey. At St Ann’s hospital in Haringey, the acute care places are really overloaded, which has led to greater demand for beds at North Middlesex hospital. Once the health economy becomes unbalanced, that can put more strain on A&E departments from general patients who do not have mental health problems.

Furthermore, there is an ambulance crisis. Police officers have told me that there are not enough ambulances and that they have to take patients to the North Middlesex hospital themselves because the ambulances cannot cope. Of course, we know that once the ambulances get to hospital, people are being treated inside the ambulances, which is completely unacceptable.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend will also appreciate that a major criticism in the CQC report was that after patients have left the ambulance, they are treated solely by nurses at grade 5, with no doctors in sight and no consultants available after 11 o’clock at night. How can there be an emergency department when there are no consultants available on a Friday or Saturday night?

Catherine West: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point about an issue that must be monitored. I look forward to the Minister reporting back on the lack of the leadership and clinical excellence that we expect on behalf of our constituents.

The cuts to public health provision will have an extra impact. I will give just one example, which many Members here have pursued—basic HIV/AIDS care. We are not doing the preventive work, and we are unnecessarily cutting back the public health budget, which will eventually lead to more people turning up at A&E or acute care departments in crisis. These issues in the health economy are all linked, and we need to do much more about all of them.

We are all aware that litigation accounts for a quarter of NHS expenditure. Why do we not get better at doing the proper work first, so that the money we spend on lawyers and expensive court cases when we get things wrong does not add up to so much? The situation is absolutely desperate. We need more investment, and we need to stop making mistakes so that we do not have to pay for litigation and so that instead of litigation there can be front-loading of resources into prevention, mental health and good-quality primary care and basic services. People accessing the NHS could then have confidence that their local service is as good as we should expect it to be.

Finally, we know that in London, there are a number of issues with the cost of living, the cost of transport and the cost of childcare for medical practitioners and nursing staff. Those issues are linked to the others that I have mentioned, and I would like to see a more robust approach from the NHS around London to the needs of those working in our hospitals and our public services. London is not like other areas, where it is cheaper to rent homes and so on. We are unable to recruit the medical practitioners and nurses we need because they cannot afford to live in the area, and we should examine that issue more energetically and not just in a theoretical way.

Thank you very much, Ms Vaz, for calling me to speak. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s conclusions.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I point out to the Front-Bench spokespersons that the wind-ups are starting now, and we are expecting a Division in the House at around ten to 4.

3.36 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) on securing the debate and giving a masterful summation of the situation.

There have been some important speeches today, including from the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West). I also note the presence of my hon. Friends the Members for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and for Edmonton (Kate Osamor).

This debate is about more than an individual hospital such as Central Middlesex or North Middlesex. There are certain underlying issues, which I will touch on. One source of pressure on an accident and emergency department—whether it is in the North Middlesex hospital, the Central Middlesex hospital or any other hospital around London—is what is happening in social care. For years, local authorities, both Labour and Conservative, have said that they are struggling to meet social care need, and studies show that many of the people who turn up at A&E would not have to go there in the middle of the night to get the care they need if the social care system was functioning properly.
There is also the difficulty of getting GP appointments. The level of difficulty may vary from constituency to constituency, but in the City and Hackney area, for quite a long time now—for years, in fact—it has taken two weeks to get a GP appointment. I am afraid that means that many of my constituents take it upon themselves to go to A&E, because they know that, however long they wait there, they will ultimately be seen. Another problem is the lack of investment in public health, which could deal with some of the health conditions that people turn up to A&E with.

There is also the issue of alcohol abuse. On a Saturday night, too many people are in A&E as a consequence of alcohol abuse, and we must consider how we can deal with those cases and stop A&E departments being filled up.

On the issue of staff recruitment, I am not seeking to be particularly party political, but I cannot believe that the junior doctors dispute will make it easier to recruit staff. One thing that was manifest in the junior doctors’ refusal of a contract that the British Medical Association had recommended to them was the complete collapse in morale among doctors, and that will be reflected in the difficulty of recruiting staff.

Part of the problem with outer-London hospitals may be the changing demographics of the areas they serve. I said I would not be party political, but I campaigned for many of my right hon. and hon. Friends at the last general election, and I was struck by the situation in areas such as Enfield, Edmonton and parts of Hornsey. When I was a child, those areas were very much leafy suburbia, but now they have a much greater density of population, a much more complex demographic profile and much more complex health and social care needs.

As shadow Secretary of State for Health, I hope to look at that issue further. We should remember that outer London does not have many socially connected teaching hospitals such as those that exist in inner London. I am not sure whether the level of funding that outer-London areas get reflects the demographic and social changes in those areas that I have seen in my lifetime.

It is easy to talk about the issue abstractly, and to talk about reports and hieroglyphics, but it is about people. The tragedy at North Middlesex is a tragedy for patients. Who would want their mother to be dead on a trolley for four and a half hours after they have died, with hospital care. They are getting almost a third-world treatment. For most of them, that is their engagement with hospital care. They are getting almost a third-world service. I do not say that lightly—someone being on a trolley for four and a half hours after they have died, and there being only one commode between 100 people, is more like a third-world than a first-world standard of healthcare. How bad does it have to get? Will the Minister assure us that we will not have a situation again in which a collapsing service at a major hospital is an open secret within the professional health services but not made apparent to Members of Parliament and the wider community?

As my right hon. and hon. Friends and the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate have reminded us, we are told that North Middlesex is implementing a safer, faster, better programme to bring down waiting times and address the issues in the Care Quality Commission’s report. As the hon. Gentleman said, why should there be a shiny new programme to ensure that our constituents get safe, fast, high-quality treatment? It is good to hear that a new A&E clinical director—Turan Huseyn from Barnet A&E—has been appointed, and that there is a new A&E nursing lead and five additional middle-grade doctors and consultants on loan from other London trusts. It is also good to hear that in July the Care Quality Commission said that although North Middlesex was still inadequate, it had “turned a corner”.

I want to raise a few points with the Minister. One, which has already been made today, is that what happened could have been foreseen. The drop in both standards and performance at North Middlesex is intimately tied up with the closure of the A&E at Chase Farm in 2014. Members who are here today raised that point at the time. I would also like to hear from the Minister about how much support is being given to the emergency care intensive support team. In response to a parliamentary question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham we heard that the trust had requested such support, so what is happening?

My final point is about doctors being kept in the dark. I want to avoid crudely party political points, but I spent three years in the Opposition health team dealing with the health Bill, and we were concerned about transparency and accountability. When there is a crisis in a hospital, despite all the different organisations that my right hon. Friend told us about, there seems to be no simple method of ensuring accountability to local representatives, and therefore to local people. Something is lacking in accountability, and we need to consider that. The fact that the collapsing performance at North Middlesex hospital was an open secret among the health service professionals but none of my hon. Friends knew about it—except anecdotally from constituents—is alarming.

This is about more than North Middlesex. There are systemic issues. There might be a systemic issue with NHS funding failing to keep up with changes in local demographics, and there is a systemic issue in social care. I am sure we will return to that in this Chamber, because local authorities have been flagging it up for some years now.

In closing, I can only repeat what the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate asked: how bad does it have to get? It is troubling if our constituents, who pay their taxes and rates, cannot get a basic level of care when they go to A&E. For most of them, that is their engagement with hospital care. They are getting almost a third-world service. I do not say that lightly—someone being on a trolley for four and a half hours after they have died, and there being only one commode between 100 people, is more like a third-world than a first-world standard of healthcare. How bad does it have to get? Will the Minister assure us that we will not have a situation again in which a collapsing service at a major hospital is an open secret within the professional health services but not made apparent to Members of Parliament and the wider community?
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): I thank the right hon. and hon. Members who have given such thoughtful, considered, well-researched and knowledgeable speeches, and also the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) who provided such a thoughtful reflection from the shadow Front Bench. Members will be pleased to know that I agree with much of what they have said. I will come on to how I think the NHS has let Members and their constituents down and what we will do to try to fix the situation.

If Members do not mind, I will first set the issue in a bit of context. North Middlesex hospital was classed by the Care Quality Commission as requiring improvement for reasons that have been mentioned. The quality of care was not consistent enough and there were concerns about patient safety. It was not one of the worst hospitals in London, or in the country, but it was certainly not one of the best. Until July 2015, it was largely meeting its institutional standards. The 95% waiting time target for A&E was being met most months, even though the department is one of the larger ones in the capital, and in spite of the reorganisations that were discussed at length by the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan).

We need to be careful, therefore, with causality, and I will not give a definitive reason why the problems came about. A direct connection between the reorganisation of Chase Farm, which began under the Government before the coalition, and the problems experienced at North Middlesex over the past year, cannot be made with great surety because the hospital was dealing with the A&E caseload within the required timelines, albeit with a standard of care that was not at the level it should have been.

Nor is this about money. It is important to point out that organisations across the NHS, as the shadow Minister knows well, have reported deficits in the past year and this is one of the smaller ones. The posts that are established in the hospital are fully funded; the problem is trying to get the right people into them. I do not deny that the hospital has a staffing problem—I will come on to that in a second—but it is not connected with funding.

Let us get to the core cause of the problems that Members have noticed and brought to the attention of the House. I am afraid that I am not able to give a complete answer at this stage, but Members are entirely right to ask why this happened. We need a better explanation. This morning, I agreed with officials and NHS England that we will look in detail at the reasons within the hospital why the performance standards slipped so significantly in the middle of last year, and why the training routines and practices slipped as well. That is the first part of the review.

The second part is on why the system did not react with the speed it needed to when concerns were first expressed about a year ago. Here, I offer an apology to Members on behalf of NHS organisations. Members were not informed at the pace and the time they should have been, and for that I offer regret. Members are right to say that they should have been the first to know there were problems so that they could properly represent their constituents and hold local leaders to account.

I offer that apology within the context of a much better story across the NHS of what happens when hospitals fail. A warning notice was issued—that was the first reason that the right hon. Member for Enfield North knew something was going wrong—because of a change to the law under the coalition Government in 2014 on when the CQC was able to issue warning notices.

Ms Abbott: Will the Minister give way?

Ben Gummer: I will in a second. The whole system of CQC Ofsted-style inspection ratings, which are designed to be user-friendly so that non-clinicians can understand how well hospitals are performing, was instituted by the Secretary of State because we wanted to shine a light on the performance and quality of care in hospitals. Through two and a half years of having special measures routines and regimes for hospitals, we have a much better understanding of why things go wrong and can put them right far more quickly. Most importantly, we have a process for engaging Members of Parliament right at the beginning. That did not happen in this instance, and I will explain why after I have taken the right hon. Lady’s intervention.

Ms Abbott: The Minister may be coming to this, but I wanted to ask who Members should look to inform them of a catastrophic drop in standards. They should not have to wait for the CQC to issue a warning.

Ben Gummer: Ideally, if things are going wrong and that has been noted within the hospital, the hospital chief executive or commissioners should inform local people, but in the past—and over the two and a half to three years since we instituted the special measures regime—it has taken a Care Quality Commission investigation to highlight poor standards of care so inadequate that the hospital needs to be placed under special measures. At that point, before the public are informed, Members of Parliament are informed by the CQC and what was Monitor and the Trust Development Authority, but is now NHS Improvement.

Joan Ryan: I will in a second. The first reason that the right hon. Member for Enfield North knew something was going wrong, and nor were Members talked to when they should have been.

Ben Gummer: Before I take the right hon. Lady’s intervention, I will explain why Members were not informed, and it is by no means an excuse. The core problem around emergency medicine and paediatrics was to do with the training places and the relationship between the General Medical Council, which looks at and regulates the quality of training, Health Education England and NHS Improvement. Because this case did not go through the traditional special measures route, which is governed by the CQC and NHS Improvement, things did not happen at the pace I would have expected and nor were Members talked to when they should have been.

The first thing I want to ensure, once we have receipt of the review I asked for this morning, is that we have a similar standard approach, were this to happen again. We have to assume that it might, because things in a large system do go wrong. We need to learn from this scenario over the past year, where Members have been let down, and ensure that it does not happen again. We can move with greater celerity and ensure that Members are informed at the earliest possible opportunity.

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I must answer a particular point made by the right hon. Gentleman about the General Medical Council. I do not think that it was silenced in any way. Genuinely, this is more muck-up than conspiracy, and I hope that it will not be repeated, as we have already assured hon. Members.

On the long-term plan, the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington was entirely right: the North Middlesex is like many hospitals on the periphery of London, which not only are seeing rapid demographic change, but suffer from the fact that they are not attractive training places that the central London hospitals are—we have to be blunt about that. I think that is wrong, because many of the challenges that aspiring doctors want are in those hospitals, which are diverse with an extraordinary range of clinical conditions. However, because of the history of the NHS, which I cannot change, a glamour is attached to the central metropolitan hospitals, and that causes challenges for district general hospitals throughout the country, as well as those on the periphery of London.

I want to change that, but we cannot do it by fiddling around. That is why I am excited by the link-up with the Royal Free. That kind of branding, which the right hon. Member for Enfield North pointed to, the strong leadership, which will provide stability, and, I hope, the ability to move consultants and senior nursing points around—some people recruited already into the Royal London and Barts will also work at the North Middlesex—will result in the diversity of career opportunities necessary to attract the kind of clinicians that the right hon. Lady and her colleagues have requested for their hospital.

Mr Lammy: To press the Minister on a bit of detail, the CQC’s press release stated:

“We have strongly encouraged the trust to engage with other organisations across the local health and social care system to resolve this challenging issue...there are moves to appoint more senior doctors—and I note that the trust is calling on consultants from other departments within the hospital to provide the routine daily support to A and E which is so badly needed.”

That was on 6 July and, clearly, the CQC did not feel that the hospital had got there. Will the Minister therefore confirm what the required number is? If he cannot tell us that, it would be helpful for him to come back to us. What is the golden number that should comfort us? Will he also confirm, because this is important, that nurses are not still reviewing patients who arrive by ambulance, because that is seriously inadequate, and we want to ensure that patients are seen by doctors?

Ben Gummer: I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that NHS England has a live rota stream from the hospital to give it the reassurance that every single junior doctor has a consultant supervisor in place at all times—precisely to ensure that the reported lapses of supervision do not recur. When the right hon. Gentleman meets the chief inspector at the CQC tomorrow, I hope that he hears something similar to what I have heard: things are not good, but they are better than they were, and the trajectory is in the right direction.

Nevertheless, we will not fix this without looking at fundamental reform of local health services, which requires changes to primary care, of the kind that we discussed when I met local Members of Parliament last week. I hope to meet them again, in a few weeks or
months, and to be able to talk about progress and the plans for the future, so that right hon. and hon. Members will be satisfied that things are getting better at the North Middlesex.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I thank the Minister—my constituents in Broxbourne will be following the outcome of this debate closely.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved, That this House has considered the performance of North Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust.

Free Childcare for 3 and 4-year-olds

4.15 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered free childcare for three and four-year-olds.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I am grateful for the opportunity to hold this important debate, the background to which is the Government’s plan to double the number of hours of free childcare that working families with three and four-year-olds are entitled to from 15 to 30 hours per week from September 2017. Pilots are due to begin this September. That builds on the introduction six years ago of an entitlement to 15 hours’ free childcare per week, which, in 2013, was extended to include two-year-olds from disadvantaged families.

There are matters on which I profoundly disagree with the Government, but I firmly believe that when their record meets the needs of people in my constituency, credit is due. I very much welcome the Department’s good progress towards ensuring that all three and four-year-olds benefit from 15 hours of free early education and childcare. In 2015, 94% of three-year-olds and 99% of four-year-olds had taken up a funded place.

My work on the Public Accounts Committee has helped further develop my understanding of a range of issues, and childcare is no exception. The Committee’s recent inquiry and subsequent report—a copy of which I have with me, in case the Minister has not managed to peruse it in detail—helped me in this area. The report’s conclusions and recommendations are numerous, but probably chief among them is the danger that the Government may not deliver on their pledge to extend the childcare offer.

I will highlight some specific concerns. They fall into four main areas: the availability of quality information for parents; workforce planning and the supply of enough qualified early years staff; the high cost of childcare in some areas, and what I call “reverse means-testing”; and monitoring the impact to ensure value for taxpayers’ money, which is very much what the Public Accounts Committee’s work is about.

The first of those four areas is the availability of quality information for parents about the childcare available close to where they live. I have welcomed the Government’s progress towards ensuring that all three and four-year-olds benefit from 15 hours of free early education and childcare. In 2015, 94% of three-year-olds and 99% of four-year-olds had taken up a funded place.

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): My hon. Friend is making an important speech. I recently met members of the Rochdale branch of the National Day Nurseries Association, who had real concerns about provision and the low funding available for places, to the point where they thought that they would not be able to make the provision. They also have concerns about things like quality and who will pay for meals. Does she share the concern of those businesses?

Karin Smyth: I do. In the Public Accounts Committee, we have found that the situation varies across the country, and many hon. Members will be able to tell the Minister about their local experience. I will discuss quality later.
Local authorities have to provide the family information service, which gives parents details not only about childcare providers that offer free entitlement but about how to claim it. I know from my own constituencies that navigating the processes can be as big a barrier to claiming entitlements as knowledge of the offer itself. That extends, incidentally, to other entitlements such as pension credit and income support.

**Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an important contribution. The challenges are multifaceted. A couple of weeks ago I met the YMCA, which runs a local nursery, and it told me that it felt that some local authorities take very high administration charges when it comes to allocating per-pupil funding to children in their care. Does she agree that local authorities need to do all they can to ensure that free childcare is spread as widely as possible?

**Karin Smyth:** I do, and I will come on to the need for local authorities to abide by the statutory direction given by the Government. That was one point that the Public Accounts Committee picked up on.

Information for people in my constituency is generally good. We have 1 Big Database, a searchable database of 1,000 childcare providers that is a collective effort of Bristol, Bath and North East Somerset and South Gloucestershire Councils and enables parents to locate the providers nearest to their home or workplace, although it lists only provision, not vacancies. However, it is clear that the quality of information varies between authorities nationwide. Shockingly, the Public Accounts Committee heard that only 30% of parents are even aware of family information services. If there is an offer but most of those who are eligible for it do not know about it or how to access it, its value is diluted to say the least. I hope that the Minister will outline how his Department will improve the quality and consistency of information for parents.

My second area of concern is workforce planning. As a former governor of a nursery and children’s centre, I recognise the importance and difficulties for providers of such planning. The Public Accounts Committee found that the Department lacked robust plans to ensure that there are enough qualified early years staff for providers to continue offering high-quality childcare. The sector has become increasingly professional, and there has been an increase in graduate recruits. That raises quality but brings challenges for providers, which now report that they are struggling to recruit. As the Department has set funding rates until 2019-20 based on 2014-15 costs, many providers are also concerned about the impact of the national living wage on their costs. The Department does not have a workforce plan for the early years sector.

There are also concerns that there is a real risk to the delivery of the pledge to provide 15 additional free hours from September 2017, due to too few providers being able to deliver that pledge because many will be minded not to become involved in the offer. I find that alarming, and it raises serious questions about the process of making pledges when deliverability appears not to have been properly assessed.

**Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): The hon. Lady is making some powerful arguments. I point out to her that one of the pilot schemes is in York. I have worked closely with the nursery providers in my constituency. Because of the funding stream and the hourly rates, there was a lot of concern among those providers to start off with about whether they would opt in to provide the second 15 hours, but the local authority and the Department for Education worked together closely and have now persuaded 60% to 70% of those providers to opt into the scheme. Does she not agree that we can persuade providers to opt in as long as there is good will from the Department and local authorities to deliver the scheme?

**Karin Smyth:** I certainly agree. That shows the importance of good pilots and good working nationally and locally, and we want to see that with the other pilots, which will start this year.

Private and voluntary providers reported to the Public Accounts Committee that the amount they are currently paid for providing free childcare is not enough to cover their costs, so in some cases they feel the need to charge parents for additional hours or obtain other sources of income to meet those costs. Providers can of course choose whether to offer parents free childcare, so there is a genuine risk that many businesses will simply choose not to offer the new entitlement because doing so could reduce their opportunity to charge parents for hours outside the entitlement. As hon. Members have said, it is important for that issue to be looked at, because different situations exist across the country.

Maintained settings—nursery classes and nurseries run by schools—tend to operate fixed morning or afternoon sessions and are less likely to offer additional chargeable hours, so their ability to offer the new entitlement is limited. That disproportionately affects children in disadvantaged areas, simply because those settings are more likely to operate in such areas. I hope the Minister will be able to outline how the Department will address the challenges of ensuring that there are enough people with the right skills to work in the sector in the years ahead. I also hope that he can reassure me that the Department will be able to use the pilots that will begin this year to test providers’ capacity to meet the expected demand for the increased entitlement. He may also want to explain how that will be done and how evaluation will be carried out, given that there is just 12 months between the start of the pilots and the scheduled full roll-out of the new entitlement, and I would welcome his thoughts on how the Department will ensure prior to the 2017 roll-out that the pilots have had genuine influence.

My third area of concern is the high cost of childcare. I know from my constituency that childcare fees present a real challenge for many working parents, as I am sure many hon. Members will agree. I have been contacted by parents who have been informed of some quite significant fee increases—up to 30%—being imposed by their private nurseries. Bristol already has some of the most expensive childcare outside London, as the Bristol Women’s Forum has highlighted, and I agree with the forum that childcare is an infrastructure issue and needs to be considered as part of our economic thinking. Indeed, the Women’s Budget Group in Bristol
Free Childcare for 3 and 4-year-olds

12 JULY 2016

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Mr Sam Gyimah): The hon. Lady mentioned the availability of information for parents about the offer. The high take-up rates for current three and four-year-olds indicates that parents are already highly aware of the free entitlement, but it is worth mentioning that we are not necessarily increasing demand but extending an offer. A lot of parents already use 30 or more hours of free childcare. The Government offer encourages those who do not get it to do so, but those who are already using the 30 hours of free childcare will get a subsidy from the Government rather than having to pay for it all themselves.

That principle is particularly important to understand because a lot of the criticism of the 30-hour entitlement, whether it is about workforce, places or whatever, seems to assume that somehow no parent in the market is already taking 30 hours of childcare and that, suddenly, from 2017 every parent will do that. The truth is a lot of parents already take more than the free 15 hours of childcare. By giving them an extra 15 hours, the Government are subsidising the additional hours they buy. We are therefore not necessarily increasing the demand, but extending the entitlement.

That principle is particularly important because it has a bearing on information and how we need to make parents aware of it. A section in the Childcare Act, which the hon. Lady will be aware of, asks local authorities to publicise information about the childcare available in the local area. The new statutory duty in the Act requires local authorities to publish information about childcare services in their local area, which will increase the information available to parents.

We have not stopped there. The Department has provided funding to the largest website in the country on childcare places—childcare.co.uk—to develop an innovative digital solution that will make it easier for parents to find information. Further, in my experience, generally when something that is otherwise quite expensive for people when they pay for it themselves is free, they tend to find out about it. I am very confident that, given the statutory duty, the innovative solutions we are taking and the fact that 98% of four-year-olds and something like 94% of three-year-olds already take 15 hours, parents talking to early years settings will realise that they can get that extended entitlement.

There will be a communications campaign before launch. I chair a cross-Government taskforce with the Minister for Employment, and at the right time we will launch a campaign alongside a new Government website to alert parents. I hope I can assure the hon. Lady that parents will be able to find out about this fantastic offer, delivered by a Conservative Government.

The second issue the hon. Lady raised was about workforce planning. As I said, the Department will launch a campaign alongside a new Government website to alert parents. I hope I can assure the hon. Lady that parents will be able to find out about this fantastic offer, delivered by a Conservative Government.

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why we will publish the workforce strategy to which I alluded—it will be on how the sector can attract and retain people. That is something we are focused on.

When the hon. Lady made the point about workforce, she also talked about places, and places in maintained settings in particular. One thing to be aware of when we discuss childcare is that no one size fits all. It is easy for us in Government to think that every parent should do this, but some parents want only the 15 hours of early education for their children. That is free, and they can continue to get it. Some might want 20 hours and some might want 30-plus hours.

The strength of the childcare sector is that there are different providers to deliver different types of childcare. We have full day-care nurseries that deliver all-day childcare; nurseries in schools that, as the hon. Lady mentioned, will do three hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon, which are focused on early education; childminders who deliver excellent childcare; and sessional providers operating from, say, church or village halls that offer 15 hours a week.

The strength of the sector is that there is diverse supply to suit different parents’ needs, which is important. We should not try to impose one model of childcare on parents. However, for parents who have been using a nursery in a school, for example, that currently offers only the first 15 hours, there is capital available to enable those schools that want to expand their provision to do so. One of the interesting things we have seen in innovative local authorities such as York, as my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) mentioned, is the bringing together of childminders and school nurseries to offer a one-stop shop for parents, so that the child can be in the school nursery for a time and then be picked up by a childminder if that is what works for the parent. We will look for a number of different solutions to be available not just to increase the supply of places but to ensure that parents get the childcare solution that fits their working lives.

Karin Smyth: I am grateful for that assurance. I agree that diversity of provision is important and valuable—I took great advantage of that when my three children were younger. Will the Minister comment on the security of income for providers? Although I do not have data to verify his assertion that the people who take 15 hours are the same as the people who might take 30 hours—I would be interested in such data—income that gives struggling providers security is important. Choice for parents is welcome, but equally providers need security of income.

Mr Gyimah: That is an important and relevant question. We want the childcare sector to be sustainable and we want providers to be able to deliver this offer. That is why in November we published the most comprehensive review of the cost of childcare ever. In order for the Government—we will become the biggest buyer of childcare in the UK—to set a price for the sector, it made sense for us to work out what the unit cost of providing childcare was and set a price that allows providers to deal with increased cost pressures such as the national living wage, which the hon. Lady mentioned, and, given that 80% of the sector is in private and voluntary settings, to enable the sector to make a profit. That was the purpose of the review, which was described by the National Audit Office as “thorough and wide-ranging.”

Those are not the Department’s words, so I hope she is reassured that the detailed work that underpins how we will decide the funding rate for providers is there.

That is what underpinned the spending review settlement. The Government’s commitment of an additional £300 million a year to increase the national average funding rates paid for the free entitlement was based on that research. We are also committing £50 million of capital funding to create an additional 4,000 early years places. More money is going into the system than ever before, but we need to ensure that it is distributed fairly. That is what we saw in York. The issue is not just the quantum of money. Because the funding formula is based on local authorities and history, we have a situation where some local authorities are getting £9 an hour per child and others are getting something like £3.50 a child. There is therefore no point in increasing the funding pot without reforming how the money is distributed to local authorities and, in turn, how it goes from local authorities to providers.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) for securing this important debate. The Minister has made several references to the need to be sure about such and such, and my hon. Friend mentioned that the full roll-out will take place soon after the pilot, so will the Minister comment on how lessons will be learnt in time for the full roll-out?

Mr Gyimah: What I can say firmly is that the Government will bring about funding reform imminently to create a system that is transparent to local authorities and fair to all early years providers. Part of the package introducing the 30 hours will be wholesale reform of early years funding. That was mentioned in the spending review and the autumn statement, and that reform is imminent. We will consult on that to seek views on our proposals from across the early years sector. We already listen to the sector in a number of other ways to ensure the funding works. Our red tape challenge is looking at bureaucracy and barriers. We have consulted on ensuring that providers are paid on time, which has been raised specifically by childminders in many areas, and on making local authority contracts with providers more consistent across different parts of the country.

We are looking at the local authority role in building on the success of the existing 15-hour entitlement. Rolling out that manifesto commitment is an opportunity to improve the way the system works on the ground. We received over 1,300 responses to our recent consultation on key elements of the operation and delivery of the extended 30-hour free entitlement from a wide range of childcare providers, local authorities and parents. Crucially, those views will help to inform how the 30-hour entitlement will be delivered at local level. We will publish our response to the consultation in the autumn ahead of affirmative debates in the House and the other place on the regulations of the Childcare Act 2016.

I hope I can assure the House first that a record amount of funding is going into the sector. Secondly, in terms of how that funding is distributed, we are looking at wholesale reform and will be publishing our intentions,
on which we will be consulting the sector, imminently. Thirdly, we are looking to reform how local authorities work with providers and will consult on that as well. Much of the disquiet around the 30-hour commitment and its implementation is from a number of people who are assuming that we will be following through with the system as it is, but we are going to reform the entire system to underpin the fact that, if the Government are going to be the biggest buyer of childcare, the old system will not work. That is because it was based on just 15 hours a week, which was a limited offer. If we are to move to 30 hours a week, we need to ensure the system we are operating in is fit for purpose.

The hon. Member for Bristol South also mentioned the high cost of childcare. The Family and Childcare Trust is the guru when it comes to childcare costs. I look forward to its childcare costs report with a degree of trepidation every year because I know I will have to tour the TV studios if the report says the cost of childcare is getting out of control. The most recent report showed that childcare costs, which had risen for the best part of a decade, are stabilising and only rose in line with inflation in 2015.

The principle here, and the reason why the Government are introducing the 30-hour commitment, is precisely to help parents with the cost of childcare, but the available support to parents does not only come in the form of the 30 hours. We will be introducing other childcare measures such as tax-free childcare, which will give parents 20% off the cost of childcare up to £10,000. If they spend £10,000 they will get £2,000 off the cost of childcare, so a parent buying in excess of 30 hours of childcare will get 30 hours free and 20% off for anything over those 30 hours—obviously, that is for three and four-year-olds. Other parents on the lower end of the income scale will get additional support through universal credit.

I hope the hon. Lady will appreciate that a substantial amount of support goes to parents for childcare, but she is right that we need to make it simple for parents. The issue is that there are multiple areas of support for childcare that are parented by different Government Departments and there is a need to stitch those together. That is what the cross-governmental childcare taskforce is looking at, so that parents do not have to go to three or four different places to try to figure out which childcare offer works best for them. There will be one portal and one port of call from which they will be able to access childcare.

The issue of cross-subsidisation was also mentioned and it is particularly important from the provider perspective. A lot of providers have been content with the free 15 hours almost as a lead generation aspect of their business, so parents get 15 hours free and then have to buy additional hours for which the providers can charge a lot more. One of the things the funding reform will specifically look at is to price this in such a way that there is every incentive for providers to actually offer parents free hours, rather than thinking that they will opt out of it. The truth of the matter is that providers do not have to offer that, but parents will be looking around for providers that can. The Government have to set a price that brings the buyers and sellers in that market together and the cost of childcare review gives us a strong basis from which we can and, I am sure, will, get that right when the funding review is published. It is an issue that we are alive to.

Another point is that, with so much subsidy going into the sector—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order.

4.45 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No.10(6)).
The Oxford-MK-Cambridge Arc

4.45 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the report by the MK Futures 2050 Commission and developing the Oxford to Milton Keynes to Cambridge arc.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. Before I go into the substance of the debate, I pay warm tribute to the chair of the MK Futures 2050 Commission, Sir Peter Gregson, who is the vice-chancellor of Cranfield University, and his team of commissioners. They have drawn on their wide set of skills and experiences to produce an excellent report. That great care was taken to select commissioners from diverse backgrounds gives considerable weight to their findings, from Lee Shostak, a former director of planning at the old Milton Keynes development corporation, to the ever-inspirational Pete Winkelman, chairman of MK Dons, and to the young entrepreneur and broadcaster Oliver Dean, who spoke for the next generations.

The people behind the report care deeply about the future of Milton Keynes and I pay tribute to them all for their hard work. It is a body of work I have long argued for. I think the title of the report—“Making a Great City Greater”—is apt. I believe the report will be extremely significant in shaping not only the future development of Milton Keynes but of the whole Oxford to Cambridge arc, of which Milton Keynes is the fulcrum.

Before I go on to talk about some of the report’s findings and their implications, let me first put it in some context. The motto of Milton Keynes is highly pertinent—“By knowledge, design and understanding”. Milton Keynes will celebrate its 50th birthday in January, and as we approach that milestone it is worth reflecting on that trinity of guiding principles. We certainly have design. Over the past half century we have filled out the urban space that was designed by the original developers and our population now exceeds the original target of 250,000. Throughout that period we have also applied great knowledge and understanding to design and grow the development of the city. Sometimes mocked by those who have never visited, Milton Keynes is characterised by quality urban design, open green spaces, inclusivity and cultural richness.

“Infrastructure before expansion”—I before E—has been key to our success. We are now expanding beyond the originally designed size of Milton Keynes, both in the physical footprint and in the number of people. In the absence of the report, which was published recently, we had to ask ourselves if we properly understood the factors that had made Milton Keynes a success as we went forward. Going beyond our designed limits has put pressure on infrastructure, which has been crucial in placing Milton Keynes as the most successful and fastest growing new city in the country.

In the previous decade, I contend that John Prescott’s English Partnerships proposals to double the size of Milton Keynes started to break that essential partnership of knowledge, design and understanding. Thankfully, those proposals were scaled back in the 2013 core strategy, which mapped out a more sustainable development of Milton Keynes into the mid and late-2020s.

strategy is now under threat. Housing developments that have outline permission are not being brought forward sufficiently quickly and place Milton Keynes in danger of not meeting the five-year supply targets.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate, and I join him in congratulating Milton Keynes on its 50th anniversary, which I look forward to celebrating. Does he agree that right across the Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford arc, which he rightly says has such enormous potential, we need not only to provide additional affordable housing but to take the opportunity to show how economic expansion and growth, notably in public and other transport links, can be an agent of improving the environment and the sustainability of the ecology and biodiversity? Often, damage to the environment is put forward as a price worth paying. Should we not be able to show that there are gains in environmental quality that economic expansion can pay for?

Iain Stewart: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will touch on the potential for growth later in my speech. One project that he and I share a passion for is the east-west rail link, which will not only be of huge economic significance for Oxford and Milton Keynes but hopefully will see a modal shift of transport away from roads and on to rail, thus enhancing the environment. I look forward to working with him on ensuring that the project happens.

Not meeting our five-year housing supply target will lead to speculative planning applications outside the core strategy being submitted, and sometimes granted, in the face of strong local opposition. That in turn creates unplanned demands on infrastructure, which may already be strained, and on services, and it means that Milton Keynes will continue to grow without an overall strategy or an understanding of the wider implications. There is a clear need for the thousands of already agreed planning applications to be brought forward.

My first ask of the Minister today is to explore every possible opportunity and to work with the developers, Milton Keynes Council, South East Midlands local enterprise partnership and all the other stakeholders on upping our annual rate of completions to levels that will satisfy the short to medium-term demand. We may also need to consider having some flexibility in the five-year target if we are able to demonstrate house building in the longer term. There are precedents for Government getting involved: one of the Minister’s predecessors helped to unlock the western flank and Newton Leys developments in Milton Keynes when they stalled in the previous Parliament.

Innovations such as council-initiated housing companies have been successfully deployed by other councils around the country to help bring forward developments. I know that the leader of the opposition in Milton Keynes, Councillor Edith Bald, has proposed that, and I urge Milton Keynes Council seriously to consider it. I also gently remind the Minister of the debate I secured a year ago on shared ownership. Shared ownership could tap into the extra capital sums made available by the Chancellor’s pension reforms, which could help to pump-prime the development of new housing estates.
I urge the Minister to consider all measures that could help to accelerate schemes that already have outline planning permission. Such measures would give Milton Keynes and the surrounding areas the space and time to develop their longer term strategy and their place in the wider Oxford-Cambridge corridor. Let me be clear: I do not see the core strategy from 2013 as the limit of Milton Keynes’s ambitions, but it has to be progressed and completed before we rush into further growth that would compound pressures on our infrastructure and services, which we might come to regret further down the line.

I regularly hear very real concerns from constituents about pressure on infrastructure and services. Those people are not anti-growth. The people of Milton Keynes have a positive, forward-looking, can-do attitude, but they are genuinely worried about ill-planned growth compromising the qualities that have made Milton Keynes the success it is. Those concerns cannot be ignored. By getting the short term right, we can plan our future and make our contribution to the national economic and housing growth that we need.

During and since the last general election, I have been calling for such a strategic vision to be developed. I was therefore delighted when Milton Keynes Council set up the Futures 2050 Commission last year. The commission has speedily but thoroughly produced its conclusions. I am particularly pleased that it sees Milton Keynes very much as an enabler in the development of the wider Oxford-Cambridge corridor. I strongly believe that our future economic development will be centred on us being a hub in the middle of that arc.

Looking at our housing growth in the context of that arc is a must. While some intensification of housing in the centre of Milton Keynes and some of the original estates is feasible and arguably would add to the vibrancy of the city centre, my personal view is that continuously adding housing developments to the periphery of Milton Keynes is not necessarily the answer. Nor is there an appetite for enormous housing developments in the greenfield areas surrounding Milton Keynes as that would start to compromise the open spaces and environmental benefits of our existing design. We should have a network of smaller developments that are proportionate and sympathetic to existing settlements, but not massive urban sprawl. That will be a subject of debate when the report is taken forward to Milton Keynes Council next week. If agreed, it will lead to further workstreams. I hope that my views will find favour with many of those who are taking part in that debate.

Whatever the future style of expansion, there are a number of prerequisites. Co-operation with neighbouring authorities will certainly be necessary, and I shall return in the last part of my speech to the administrative aspect of that. As I alluded to when answering the intervention from the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Mr Smith), there is a need to develop infrastructure along the arc. I am delighted that in the Budget this year, it was announced that the National Infrastructure Commission has been commissioned to look at those projects.

Infrastructure development will certainly involve proceeding as quickly as possible with existing schemes such as east-west rail and the Oxford-Cambridge expressway, but it will also involve ensuring that the arc is at the forefront of installing the very latest communications technologies, such as 5G. Most significantly, it will need to include the potential transformative effect of smart mobility technology and wider smart cities technology. Milton Keynes is already pioneering such work, with numerous projects up and running—for example, at the transport systems Catapult, at the Open University and in Cranfield. Such technology will facilitate a better network of smaller developments across the arc that will command far more popular support than ever greater urban sprawl.

By developing that infrastructure and placing us at the fulcrum of the arc, Milton Keynes and surrounding towns and villages will be ideally placed to develop a globally competitive knowledge-based economy of scale. Addressing skills is critical to that. The commission’s report contains many imaginative proposals, and one of the most exciting of those is the Milton Keynes institute of technology—MK:IT. Milton Keynes has long aspired to have a campus-based university of its own, but I am not sure that the traditional model necessarily fits with what we are and what we can aspire to be. We should innovate, and something like MK:IT would complement the existing higher and further education institutes and provide a pool of skills from which local companies can draw as the economy develops. It would be particularly well placed to be the centre for the intelligent mobility education needed to create a qualified workforce and to allow the UK to gain the lion’s share of the intelligent mobility market, which is forecast to reach £900 billion by 2025.

I urge hon. Members to read the report recently published by the transport systems Catapult, which identifies a real gap in our knowledge market and makes some interesting proposals about how we can address that. I believe MK:IT would sit squarely with that. It would also fit neatly with the Government’s intention to expand higher education and research, as set out in the recently published Higher Education and Research Bill, which I hope will be in front of the House soon. I urge the Minister to work closely with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and our local higher and further education institutions to explore that opportunity. I believe MK:IT can be the driver of our future growth.

My final point concerns the governance structure for the developments to which I have referred. Milton Keynes’s future cannot be seen in isolation from the wider area. Historically, the boroughs, cities and counties along the arc have faced in different directions; that is a product of history and geography. There have been some positive developments to get the different authorities to work more closely together. An example is SEMLEP, but I urge the Minister to consider other innovative solutions. The growth of Milton Keynes and the arc will have to be different from the other models of devolution being introduced in traditional metropolitan conurbations. I do not want the expansion of Milton Keynes to be seen in any way as a land-grabbing exercise from neighbouring authorities, which would rightly and inevitably be resisted, but I urge the Minister to engage with all the authorities along the arc to develop something new that is innovative and collaborative and will facilitate the sorts of development that I have discussed.
My key ask today is for the Government to give us the space and time to develop our long-term strategy and implementation timetable. There must be solutions to meeting the short-term housing needs while we develop Milton Keynes at the heart of the corridor. The Milton Keynes Futures 2050 Commission report and the work of the National Infrastructure Commission represent a golden opportunity to develop a bright and successful future built on knowledge, design and understanding. Let us not squander it.

5.1 pm

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) on securing this important debate. I am obviously proud to respond on behalf of the Labour party to the issues raised, and I pay tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey).

You will understand, Mr Walker, that I have been in post for only a short period and it has been rather a busy time for me, but I had the pleasure of serving as a local Labour councillor for 16 years in a previous life, and I understand the importance of strategising and of linking housing to economic development. I am pleased to see in the MK Futures 2050 Commission report a really good example of how a well run, Labour-led local authority—I accept that this is cross-party work—can provide leadership, direction and ambition for the future, even during a very difficult financial period for local government.

As the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South mentioned, Milton Keynes is approaching 50 years since being designated a new town by the Wilson Labour Government in 1967. I am familiar with new towns. Peterlee, in my constituency, is from a similar generation, or in fact a little earlier—the post-war generation—and just slightly to the south of that is Newton Aycliffe.

New towns have particular strengths and problems. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, this new town—actually, it is a new city—has developed to the extent that it is home to 270,000 people. As Milton Keynes has grown, so too has its regional, national and, indeed, international importance. I understand that it is now the biggest economy in the South East Midlands LEP area. It has a strong and internationally recognised smart city project and is fast developing into what could be described as the Milton Keynes city economic region.

The city is acknowledged as offering a particularly high quality of life, with many parks and open green spaces. The concept of the original planners was that open green spaces and parks would run throughout the built environment—that was a feature of many new towns of the period.

The importance of Milton Keynes to the UK economy was recognised by no less a person than the Chancellor himself in his Budget speech, when he asked that the National Infrastructure Commission should investigate how infrastructure investment in the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge arc—the so-called innovation corridor—could improve the overall output of the UK economy.

I therefore commend Milton Keynes Council for establishing the MK Futures 2050 Commission, a panel of independent, nationally respected figures from across the academic, business, public and private sectors who have come together to produce a report on how the city can continue to be prosperous into the future. Indeed, the commission has gone further, identifying the challenges and barriers to success and what the city can do in the short, medium and long term to ensure sustainable growth. It is a fine example of not taking the status quo for granted but instead ensuring that local authorities lead the way in innovating and adapting so that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Mr Smith) mentioned, the citizens they represent can access affordable housing, well paid jobs and a clean, healthy lifestyle.

The commission undertook detailed research and gathered evidence, including more than 6,000 submissions from local residents and stakeholders. It highlights the fact that the factors that have made Milton Keynes a success in its first 50 years are the very issues that may have an impact on future growth: affordability, access to well paid employment, good infrastructure and the advantageous geographical position that the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South described—it is near the M1 and the west coast main line and between London, Birmingham, Oxford and Cambridge.

The commission identifies some of the risks to employment that could threaten many jobs, including well paid ones. Housing affordability is a key issue, as it is in much of the south-east, as unaffordable housing limits the supply of a skilled workforce. The city of Milton Keynes, like so many others, including Washington in County Durham, was designed on a grid system. That worked well originally, but is approaching capacity, which could have an impact on future growth. Finally, competition, not just from the UK but from our European and global competitors, will continue and intensify.

The conclusion recommended that to be successful, Milton Keynes needed to focus on the growth of high-quality, knowledge-intensive jobs and its continued development as a green and affordable place to live. To deliver that economic growth and prosperity, the commission has recommended six “big projects” that are vital to the future success of Milton Keynes. I will not talk about them all, because of the shortage of time, but I want to pick out a couple. The commission recommends that Milton Keynes’s population should grow in the future to at least 400,000 people. As the hon. Gentleman said, much of that growth would not take place in Milton Keynes itself; it would not be within the current local authority boundaries, but would take place along the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor.

I am told that at a recent meeting with the National Infrastructure Commission, the leaders of Milton Keynes, Cambridge and Oxford expressed strong support for that idea, with support from their respective local enterprise partnerships. I am pleased to say that those councils, along with Norwich and Swindon, have come together to form the Fast Growth Cities network, which has also promoted the idea, with the support of the much respected Centre for Cities think tank. Again, the hon. Gentleman referred to that. The importance of those cities to our national economy, with their high-wage, high-productivity, high-skill and low-welfare economies, is significant. To highlight that, I will make a comparison with my own
region, the north-east of England. The gross value added output of those cities is almost equal to that of the northern powerhouse. Given recent events and the UK’s intention to leave the EU following the recent Brexit vote, the continued success of those economies is even more vital to the success of the public finances.

If I may, I would like to put a few questions to the Minister. I would like to ask, in particular, when the infrastructure investment in the east-west rail link linking Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge is to be delivered. The scheme has been subject to continued delays and slippages. I understand that the local authorities, businesses and potential investors are concerned about the great uncertainty over the speedy delivery of that project. Will the Minister give top priority to making representations to the National Infrastructure Commission?

As the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South identified, there is a gap in university provision. I point out that Milton Keynes is home to another excellent creation of the Wilson Labour Government—the Open University, a pioneer in distance learning. The MK Futures 2050 Commission recommends the establishment of a Milton Keynes institute of technology—a kind of Massachusetts Institute of Technology concept, like they have in the United States, which seems a brilliant idea. It would take advantage of, and apply, advanced research and training and transform it into world-leading innovative enterprises. The UK currently lacks that type of establishment, and the idea has enormous potential. Again, I echo the hon. Gentleman by asking the Minister to engage with his colleagues in making representations to BIS, asking it to make contact with Milton Keynes Council to investigate how the idea can be taken forward.

This is a good point at which to highlight that the commission is clear that if growth is to be delivered, the population of Milton Keynes must be able to share in the benefits of growth. It calls it “inclusive growth”, and the point requires highlighting that growth must benefit not just the few but the many. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), the shadow Chancellor, has pointed out, that is not easy to achieve with sustained investment in infrastructure. I am pleased that the report favours that approach to growth. Will the Minister agree to meet representatives from the Fast Growth Cities group to discuss their needs, and does he agree that the opportunity of having five local authorities that want to embrace growth, and housing growth in particular, should not go to waste?

I am sure the Minister agrees that the report is an exceptional and groundbreaking exercise by a local authority. It provides a context in which Milton Keynes and the surrounding authorities can discuss growth for the future and address issues they face. I am sure that many local authorities in other parts of the country would be very interested in learning from their experience and example. I therefore urge the Minister to meet representatives from Milton Keynes Council to discuss the benefits and potential of this approach, and to offer any assistance he can in co-ordinating responses from other agencies.

Finally, I would like to place on record my thanks and appreciation to Milton Keynes Council for commissioning this forward-thinking report, and to the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South for raising it today. In particular, council leader Councillor Peter Marland and the chief executive Carole Mills have shown excellent leadership throughout. The director of strategy, Geoff Snelson, the head of policy, Sarah Gonsalves, and the project manager, Fiona Robinson, have worked tirelessly to produce an excellent report. The Milton Keynes Futures 2050 report is a fine example of local innovation and the power of good local leadership.

I look forward to hearing the Minister’s reply, and I hope that he will welcome the report; it is well worth considering taking it forward with Milton Keynes Council and the other local authorities.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Minister, you have until 5.45 pm, but if you would like to leave two minutes at the end for the Member who moved the motion, that would be very well received. I am sure.

5.14 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I will ensure that I leave at least two minutes for my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart). I really want to congratulate him on having secured this debate, along with everybody involved in the work of the Milton Keynes Futures 2050 Commission—all the commissioners and Sir Peter Gregson, obviously—who have put this forward and worked with ambition and vision to feed into this long-term plan for Milton Keynes. I think it mirrors the clear ambition and determination that my hon. Friend has to see Milton Keynes continue being a very special place, which I know it is from my experience many years ago—I was not too far from there as a student—and from visiting him over the last few years. It is a really good example of the real success that there has been from the original new town’s ambitions; it has continued to grow ever since.

There is the ambition for seeing things like more lifelong learning opportunities at a new university, as the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame M. Morris) on the Opposition Front Bench outlined, along with a good example of that kind of ambition. As was said, it is linked with the Open University. It is also important for areas to realise that the planned reforms in the Higher Education and Research Bill announced in the Queen’s Speech earlier this year make it easier to establish new universities, helping more providers to offer high-quality degrees. As a Government we are making sure that we work to deliver in those areas.

No one is in any doubt about the clear ambitions for Milton Keynes for the future, not just through this plan but as part of that Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge growth corridor. In March 2016, the Chancellor announced that he had asked the National Infrastructure Commission to lead an inquiry into the potential of Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge. He asked the commission to explore the corridor as a key growth locale for high-tech, knowledge-intensive industries coupled with an ambitious, high-quality housing offer to meet the growing needs of the area. That commission’s inquiry is currently under way and I look forward to seeing its recommendations in due course. It is worth noting, in response to the point made by the hon. Member for Easington, that the consultation is open until 5 August and I encourage people to feed into that.
Increasing the supply of housing is critical to our economic success, in Milton Keynes and more generally. As a Government, we have got the country building again with a 25% increase last year alone. We have set out an ambitious vision for housing—probably the most ambitious vision for a generation—by doubling the housing budget to more than £20 billion to deliver on our ambitions to build 1 million new homes. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South outlined and commented on the type of homes, affordable homes and shared ownership. I would encourage the area to look at the available funds. There is £4.7 billion-worth of funding for shared ownership specifically, as well as the £1.2 billion fund for starter homes that is available as well. I hope that organisations in the area will look at those.

We also welcome the recent announcement by the Home Builders Federation, on behalf of its largest members, to further increase that growth in supply. My hon. Friend touched on this issue around build-out rates. This is also creating more transparency as we go forward about what those rates are, and building more homes to support the ambitions we all have to see the homes we need actually being built. Increasing housing supply cannot be done in isolation, and I recognise the important roles that having the right spatial plans, infrastructure and services play in creating the right communities for the future.

I will turn to a couple of points around this issue specifically. First, on planning, Milton Keynes adopted a core strategy in 2013 and I know that it is now working on a new local plan to be published, hopefully, later this year. It is right that local authorities keep their plans up to date and that they work with neighbourhood plans. I was delighted when visiting Milton Keynes not too long ago to see some of the ambitious neighbourhood planning work that is going on; indeed, I think the largest in the country is in Milton Keynes. Local councils need to make sure that they are making decisions on planning applications locally and neighbourhood plans are the ultimate way to do that with the local community having real involvement and control over planning by having a neighbourhood plan that has weight in law. In determining planning applications, local councils have to have regard to their local plan as well as to national planning policy and neighbourhood plans. We are committed to making sure that we keep the country building, to deliver the homes, and the type of homes, that our communities want to see.

Our consultation document in December 2015 proposed specific changes to the national planning policy to drive up the delivery of new housing and bring forward more land for development. However, I recognise that excessive pre-commencement planning conditions can slow down or even stop the construction of homes after they have been given planning permission, and my hon. Friend made the point about the frustration people feel about the gap between planning permission being granted and housing actually being built. The new neighbourhood planning and infrastructure Bill that was announced in the Queen’s Speech will seek to deal with that issue. We need to make sure that the homes that are getting planning permission are being built and that the process is not being slowed down by unnecessary bureaucracy.

Grahame M. Morris: Does the Minister accept that the constraints often do not just relate to delays in planning? In my experience, certainly in my authority, that was never an issue. The problems often relate to the lack of infrastructure. The MK Futures 2050 Commission has highlighted how important it is to invest in transport infrastructure. Will he at least acknowledge that that is one area—from the six big issues—that should be addressed?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is getting the cart and the horse the wrong way round. He is absolutely right that, in terms of getting homes built and planning for homes in future, infrastructure is part of the equation and is part of what a local authority should be looking at when it develops its local plan. However, once planning permission is granted—infrastructure is part of the consideration in granting permission—unfortunately that is one of the main delays that causes the gap between planning permission being granted by the local authority and work starting on site is planning conditions. Examples from around the country show that there can be more than 1,000 planning conditions on one site. That explains why, in many cases, a council will give permission but it can be up to a year or two years later if not longer before a builder can get on site and physically start doing anything, including putting in infrastructure. That frustrates communities, local authorities and builders. We need to make sure that we are doing something about it, so we are taking that kind of bureaucracy out of the system. That is what I mean by saying that we want to continue to reform and speed up the planning process, so we minimise the delays caused by unnecessary or burdensome conditions.

Looking towards the longer term, I recognise the key role that dedicated delivery bodies have played in the creation and continued growth of somewhere such as Milton Keynes. At the outset, there was—there is—one of the town development corporation, and more recently there has been the Milton Keynes development partnership. I welcome the MK Futures 2050 Commission’s focus on ensuring that the right delivery vehicle is in place to drive Milton Keynes’ further transformation in future.

Through the Housing and Planning Act 2016, which we have just passed, we have made some important changes to the new towns legislation to make it easier to set up new statutory development corporations when local areas decide that that is the best way forward, but having the right infrastructure in place to support growth is critical for the wider planning process. The neighbourhood planning and infrastructure Bill will transform how we make long-term plans for our nation’s infrastructure, empowering local communities to get the homes and local infrastructure that they want and need delivered, and making infrastructure policy at the national level much more strategic and consistent. The Bill will underpin that statutory function.

Significant funding is already being invested to support housing growth. More than £200 million of the local growth fund has been prioritised to date to support growth across the south-east midlands and the Northamptonshire areas. We are expecting a further bid for local growth funding from the south-east midlands shortly as part of the current bidding round.

In addition, the Government have announced plans to radically reform the business rates system to enable local government to be more self-sufficient and to benefit
from growth. The changes build on the existing reforms that have given areas 50% of the business rate growth, and full retention pilots are going on in four areas. The 100% retention reforms are accompanied by additional flexibilities for local authorities to reduce rates to boost growth, and mayoral combined authorities will have the opportunity to increase rates through an infrastructure levy with the agreement of the local enterprise partnership.

Those are big changes with significant opportunities for local government. How local government chooses to use that retained income and the growth in business rates in areas such as Milton Keynes will be a matter for the people there. However, I am encouraged by Milton Keynes’s wish to earmark spending for education and infrastructure investment and by the ambition shown in the report through the six projects. We are sensitive to the challenges that will come with the changes we are making and are therefore seeking feedback on them in an open manner, through a consultation that was launched last week. I encourage people to take part in and respond to that.

Securing the right level of developer contributions is also vital to ensuring that infrastructure is delivered in the right places and is supporting growth. That is part of the planning process. A review of the operation of the community infrastructure levy is being undertaken by an independent panel, which will report back to Ministers later this year. That review is to look at assessing the extent to which the levy provides an effective mechanism for funding infrastructure and to recommend changes that would improve its operation in support of our wider housing and growth objectives, with a clear focus on the needs and plans for local areas.

I recognise the significant ambitions that Milton Keynes has, both as a city and as part of the wider Oxford-MK-Cambridge arc. We look forward to working with the area on just that, as the hon. Member for Easington said.

Grahame M. Morris: In view of that commitment, will the Minister agree to meet representatives of the Fast Growth Cities group to discuss how it is possible to embrace growth—housing growth, in particular—and how that initiative should not go to waste?

Brandon Lewis: I meet the cities group fairly regularly and have done as a local government Minister over the last few years, and I am always happy to meet any organisation that wants to talk about developing more housing in its area. There is very much an open-door policy on areas that want to develop housing.

This is all part of our drive for local areas to have the power to work out what is right for them. That is why it is absolutely right that we continue to devolve powers, and the devolution landscape has been driven by those local areas. Government have responded to places that are clear about their ambitions and how they want to get there. I encourage areas to work out what they think is right for them and then to make that pitch to us. With the right governance and structures in place, anywhere could look to drive forward its own priorities and find its own local solutions, and to have the power and ability to do that. I look forward to seeing that develop further in Milton Keynes and to seeing it work to deliver on the ambition it clearly has. I know that it will be supported and matched by the ambitions of my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South.

5.26 pm

Iain Stewart: May I place on record my gratitude to the Minister, the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame M. Morris) and the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Mr Smith) for their contributions to the debate?

I conclude with this observation: Milton Keynes is unique and it has been an enormous success, and I believe it can continue to innovate and provide the exemplar for other towns and cities round the country. I think the report from the MK Futures 2050 Commission is inspirational and, although I will probably not be here looking back in 50 years’ time, I think history will judge this report as the start of a new chapter in urban planning and development.

I am heartened by what the Minister says on a number of fronts, and by the welcome that the Government will give to an innovative model of governance structure. What will work in Milton Keynes and surrounding areas will not be the same as for the west midlands, Greater Manchester, Bristol or any other urban area. It will have to be new and I look forward to seeing proposals coming out from Milton Keynes Council and the neighbouring authorities. I also look forward to seeing the detail in the neighbourhood planning and infrastructure Bill, which will help to unlock developments that have been stalled. What will be interesting is if we can develop a new delivery vehicle for implementing the types of projects that the report contains.

In conclusion, I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to bring to the attention of national Government what we are doing locally. There are still many debates and conversations to be had locally about how we take this forward, but I hope they will be favourably received.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the report by the MK Futures 2050 Commission and developing the Oxford to Milton Keynes to Cambridge arc.

5.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Stephen Doughty: My right hon. Friend makes a crucial point. The industry, its workers and all of us want to hear categorical assurances from the Minister today about action. We do not want to hear more platitudes and warm words. Particularly with the uncertainty, there is a real danger that the answer to our many questions will be, “We don’t know. Wait for the new Prime Minister and the new Government.” Well, the steel industry cannot afford to wait. It could not afford to wait before, and we now need real assurances. This is a matter of national significance.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate. He is rightly talking about securing concrete action from the Government. Does he agree that one idea would be for the Government to redouble their efforts to ensure that British steel is used in procurement projects, both in the supply chain and in headline contracts?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely agree. The fundamentals of this debate have not changed. It is about the action being taken on energy costs, on the UK steel industry’s terms of trade, on unfair dumping, on the additional risks now being created by the uncertainty about our future trading relationships and, indeed, on the crucial question of procurement.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his work on that subject. Additional uncertainty is being created by the news that we have heard in the past few days, and I am interested to hear the Minister’s perspective.

Stephen Doughty: I share the hon. Gentleman’s concern about the future of all the steel industry in south Wales. I have no doubt that we will shortly be hearing from my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on that subject. Additional uncertainty is being created by the news that we have heard in the past few days, and I am interested to hear the Minister’s perspective.

It is now more vital than ever that the Government continue to work with us, with the steel industry, with the steel trade unions—particularly Community, GMB and Unite—and with other partners to instil confidence that we will all work together to create the right business environment, which particularly applies to the devolved Administrations. The Welsh Government, following their re-election and the reappointment of Carwyn Jones as First Minister, have reiterated their commitment to doing everything they can to support the Welsh steel industry. We want that co-operative relationship, which has been in the interest of the industry, to continue.

Crucially, the steel industry is a question for the incoming Prime Minister. Will she take the kind of laissez-faire approach that we have seen from the current Prime Minister? There is no industrial strategy, and his idea was that we should not be intervening—the series of interventions in the steel industry came quite late, however welcome many of the steps taken by the Minister.
What people want to know today is what completely Post-Brexit, will the Government reconsider that measure unilateral tax introduced by the British Government for the industry was the carbon price floor, which was a Cleveland (Lab): One of the unilateral cost increases long term.

investment and support required by the industry in the trade provisions; provide funding mechanisms for energy increase the procurement of UK steel; address unfair together with the different producers, has made it clear to the interests of the industry as a whole and is working on the referendum, particularly on the different trade options that might be on the table and their many implications for the steel industry. Like many others, I would argue that retaining access to the single market is crucial. There is a Celsa plant in my constituency. Celsa is a European company based in Catalonia that has plants all over Europe. Almost 100% of its trade is within the EU, so if we lost the ability to trade in that single market on the kind of terms we currently have, the additional cost of punitive tariffs, or other tariffs, could be devastating.

We also have questions about the future of the state aid rules under any regime. Let us not forget that it was often suggested during the referendum campaign that, somehow, everything was the EU’s fault, but actually the EU has taken many steps to support the steel industry across Europe. The reality is that there are rules that would apply under European economic area and World Trade Organisation trading arrangements. What does the Minister have to say about the different options on the table? What would be the best one for our steel industry?

Other uncertainties might be created in any transitional period. Let us not forget that this is not just about exports. Raw materials are imported, whether it is scrap, as with Celsa in my constituency, or other raw materials. There could be an impact both on the steel industry’s inputs and its exports. The other implication is for exchange rates. Some would argue that the fall in the pound provides a benefit to the steel industry, but of course that benefit is potentially offset by the changes in input costs. I can see no positive net benefit from the current currency situation. Indeed, any short-term marginal benefit will definitely be offset by the much wider risks. What is the Minister’s perspective on that?

UK Steel, which has done an excellent job of representing the interests of the industry as a whole and is working together with the different producers, has made it clear that we need to remove the unilateral energy costs; increase the procurement of UK steel; address unfair trade provisions; provide funding mechanisms for energy efficiency projects; and set out a clear direction for the investment and support required by the industry in the long term.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): One of the unilateral cost increases for the industry was the carbon price floor, which was a unilateral tax introduced by the British Government without any foresight. They then had to request permission from the EU to try to provide a compensation scheme. Post-Brexit, will the Government reconsider that measure in the immediate future to give more space to the steel industry on costs?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely agree. Given that the facts of our relationship have changed so substantially, what people want to know today is what completely new and different things the Government are willing to do with the levers they control, to respond to the wider uncertainty being created.

That is even more important because in a post-Brexit Britain the self-sufficiency and security of the steel supply is of even greater strategic and economic importance for our construction industry, our defence industry and all the other parts of our economy in which the steel industry and other foundation industries play such a crucial role. In any circumstances, the steel industry is of national importance, but with Britain going alone that will be even more the case, which is why we need that action.

I have already mentioned procurement. I am still deeply disappointed that we do not seem to have seen anything concrete. We have heard a lot of good words about the guidance that has been issued to Departments, but I have yet to see any concrete projects to provide certainty to the industry. When I asked the Minister for Defence Procurement shortly after we returned from the referendum recess, there were a lot of warm words but no clarity on which defence, construction or infrastructure projects are to enjoy increased supply of UK steel. Indeed, this is not just a responsibility of the UK Government. As we have discussed in this place before, it is deeply disappointing that the Aberdeen bypass, for example, is being produced using Turkish steel. This is the responsibility of all the devolved Administrations, as well as the UK Government.

As a Welsh MP I would do this, but I mentioned the support that the Welsh Government have been providing. Quite rightly, everybody is concerned about the Tata situation in particular, which I know my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon will speak on, but the Welsh Government have made it absolutely clear that they are committed to supporting the sales process and the companies involved, and that they will continue to put every resource they can to that purpose. As far as I understand, their offer of support definitely remains on the table, but obviously there needs to be clarity on the bidders and the plans coming forward. I would be very interested to hear what discussions the Minister and her officials have had with the Welsh Government over the last few days.

There is a crucial broader point to make. We have seen discussions going on with the steel council and the various working groups, but I am concerned and would be interested to hear the Minister clarify whether those discussions and that dialogue have continued, whether the steel council and the working groups have met and whether her officials have continued working on it, or whether everybody’s attention has simply been diverted by the implications of the referendum and the switch in Prime Minister and Government. We cannot afford to be diverted. Diversion of attention for a few weeks or a month could be absolutely devastating. I would like some assurances from the Minister about what is happening.

I want to allow as much time as possible for other Members to speak, because I know many want to. Let me end by saying that we have all made the arguments before and we know what they are: they are on energy, trade terms, procurement and the wider business conditions. We have seen progress on some of those areas from the Minister—I acknowledge that—but not enough. This decision is so fundamental in changing the terms for this business and its future that we need to know what is
happening that is new, that is different and that will give that certainty, reassurance and hope to the industry for the months and years ahead. As I said, this industry has a future. It can play a vital strategic role in post-Brexit Britain, but it will only do that if we see decisive Government intervention to ensure that it survives and is able to compete on a global stage. I thank you, Mrs Gillan, and every Member who has attended today to show their support.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. As you can see, many Members want to speak. I am entirely in your hands. If I impose an informal limit of five minutes on each of you, that will leave enough time for those on the Front Benches to sum up. But if I find that that is slipping, I am afraid I will have to impose a limit on the number of speakers.

9.43 am

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Thank you, Mrs Gillan. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and congratulate him on securing this debate. I am sorry if I repeat anything but, as he said, we have all been repeating and repeating ourselves about the state of the British steel industry, certainly since I came to Parliament.

We have had good news in Scotland: we had a Scottish steel taskforce and the former Tata plants are now in the hands of Liberty Steel, which at the moment is recruiting for new workers. That is a fairly good news story from Scotland, but it is only thanks to the fact that the Scottish Government have put steel at the heart of their industrial strategy and have an industrial plan.

The situation we now face is probably one of the most difficult in our post-war history, and what we do now will have serious consequences for our future. The pound is plummeting and investment is going elsewhere. The experiment with an EU referendum to satisfy Tory Back Benchers has completely backfired and it is now apparent that there is no plan—not only no industrial strategy, but no plan for going forward with Europe. Where will the UK be in terms of its European status? Will we completely Brexit? Will we be part of the European Free Trade Association? What will happen? We do not know, but I know that there is a serious plan in Scotland and the First Minister is working tirelessly with her Cabinet and with Scottish officials to speak to European partners because, as we all know, Scotland voted to stay in and we want to be in Europe—we are European to our very core.

I want to completely refute what has been said about the Aberdeen western peripheral route. I can inform the Chamber that the subcontract for steel reinforcement was recently awarded to BRC, which is situated just outside my constituency and which is the UK’s largest supplier of steel reinforcement. The steel for that contract is produced in Newport; some of it requires cutting, but will the hon. Lady say where the steel was actually manufactured—not where it was processed but where it was actually created?

Stephen Doughty: I find that information very helpful, but will the hon. Lady say where the steel was actually manufactured—not where it was processed but where it was actually created?

Marion Fellows: Let me say that we do not manufacture steel in Scotland, but that goes back to when the Tories closed Ravenscraig in 1992. We roll steel in Scotland; we deal with plate. [Interruption.] The Tories are in-fighting from a sedentary position; I hope I can continue.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. He is indeed chuntering. If he wants to intervene, he must make it a lot clearer than that.

Marion Fellows: From the start of the steel crisis, the Scottish Government have exhibited tremendous leadership and collective decision making. That demonstrates what is possible when a Government have the will to intervene and have the interests of the workers at heart, but most of all when there is clear leadership and a coherent plan. Following the result of the EU referendum, it is entirely apparent that there was no plan from the UK Government for how to deal with a leave vote. In fact, we are still waiting for the change of Prime Minister today, and we still do not know who will be in charge of the business of steel next week, or even tomorrow. There are also real difficulties in the Opposition, who are still in-fighting rather than moving forward, but I pay complete and sincere tribute to those Opposition Members who have been fighting day and night for their constituents and their steel industry. I cannot say strongly enough what I have learned from them about how best to achieve things and move forward the steel industry in Scotland, half of which is based in my constituency.

No doubt the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) will speak on Tata Steel’s problems later. There are real issues there, and all this uncertainty is making the whole situation in Port Talbot much more difficult than it needs to be. I implore the Minister to try to move things forward and to actually make a difference to the steel industry. The Government have had to be pushed, prodded and shoved to get anything done, and there are still serious difficulties with energy costs, rates and all the other things that were causing difficulties a year ago.

I commend the Government, and the Scottish Government, for moving forward on procurement, which is essential and a real priority, but procurement is about the future. For steel in the UK overall, we need action now.

9.50 am

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I am pleased to see the Minister in her place. I hope she is going to advocate and fight for us under the new Prime Minister.

Business needs certainty. Investment depends on certainty about access to the markets and about the stability of the currency. We need clarity on the timetable and
process for Brexit. We need to know what sort of deal the Government intend to seek and we need very close dialogue between them and the steel industry so that steel companies know exactly what they are facing.

It is a particularly difficult time for the steel industry, so it is vital that steel companies are given every possible guarantee of support and confidence so that they keep the industry here in the UK. We need the Government to make safeguarding the steel industry a top priority. With all the uncertainty of the future—uncertainty about access to the markets and the price that we could have to pay for imported steel—it is vital that we keep our own steel industry here, both for security and to support our manufacturing industry.

Those advocating Brexit spoke of the opportunities it would offer to set our own conditions, but with that comes responsibility. The Government can no longer blame the EU. We need a Government who create the most favourable conditions possible for our steel manufacturers. They are now in direct competition with steel manufacturers around the world, so it must be made better for them to invest here in the UK than anywhere else.

We need urgent action on energy prices. As has been mentioned, the carbon floor tax could be dealt with straightaway. It was unilaterally imposed, but we then sought state aid to offset its effects. We can do something about that instantly, but more than that I support the request by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for innovation. We need much more direct investment in innovative projects wherein the energy plant is linked directly to the steel plant, thereby keeping energy costs right down. We need Government help and intervention to make that happen.

We need speedy and targeted protection against Chinese imports. If we see that something is in direct competition with one of our products, let us act immediately so that we can protect our production lines. We also need much clearer incentives for research and development and for improvements to plant. We need a system of capital allowances and business rates that does not penalise plants that are trying to improve, increase their energy efficiency and be future leaders in their sector.

We need a really clear industrial strategy for the wider opportunities for the steel industry. We need to know exactly why we are producing the steel, what it is for and how it links into our manufacturing chain. In order to protect that chain, we need to keep steel production in the UK. We have heard warm words about public procurement, but we have yet to see real delivery. We need our supply chains to go directly into the projects that have been mentioned, many of which have not yet started.

I have particular fears for Tata Steel, which has a plant in my constituency, one in Port Talbot, and others throughout the UK. We are very worried indeed about what might happen in the talks with ThyssenKrupp. It is a very large conglomerate, and we have previously seen it decide that it just does not want to do certain things anymore and then pull out of certain sectors and close down all the factories. We have seen that happen with some of its car plants. I can easily imagine a scenario in which ThyssenKrupp simply hoovers us up, then closes us down and moves all its steel manufacturing to continental Europe. The Welsh Government will do their best to provide support, but I implore the Minister to make sure that it is an unqualified decision for ThyssenKrupp to keep its UK sites open, or that we have other options to explore for keeping our steel manufacturing here.

It is vital that every potential obstacle is removed and that the best conditions are provided to encourage investment in our steel industry—investment for the future that will last. We need to ensure that we have a steel industry and a manufacturing industry, that we use our steel for procurement, and that we have the security of producing our own steel.

I have a couple of quick comments to make in the short time I have. A collection of economic factors causing negativity in the UK steel market have put increasing pressure on steelworks—I am well aware of that, as are other Members. Demand for steel in the UK has never recovered from the financial crisis of some years ago, remaining 30% lower than pre-2008 levels. Energy costs are a massive issue for us in Northern Ireland, as they are for the British steel industry. Business rates and environmental taxes have squeezed the industry that we bit more.

We have also had problems with the Chinese steelmakers. It is estimated that they lost millions—indeed, probably billions—of dollars in 2015 as domestic demand slowed but GDP targets remained stubborn. As a result, steel exports from China to Europe have more than doubled since 2013, helping to send the price of the metal down to roughly half of 2011 levels. The EU could have introduced tariffs to address the problem, yet failed to do so. People sometimes say that tariffs are self-defeating, but I do not subscribe to that view. They can encourage our industry, and I believe we should introduce them. The US, for example, has a heavy tariff on Chinese steel imports of a whopping 236%. If the USA can do it, I do not see why we cannot do it here. Perhaps the Minister can explain.

Brexit is now over and the decision has been made. For the record, I was very much in favour of the campaign to leave the EU and I am very pleased that the people of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland decided to do that. Let us move forward together collectively and positively to see what we can do for British industry. The problems with the EU were real. It would have taken all 28 member states to agree to a tariff, so it was never going to be a possibility.
Let us look at some examples of where problems still exist in Europe. Take Belgium, for example, home to—I say this facetiously—the circus HQ. The EU has called for Belgium to recover €11 million of state aid that was used to prop up the steelmaker Dufierco, while an investigation has been launched into Italy’s support for Ilva. The Belgian support was considered illegal because “you could not find a market investor that would give them the kinds of loans they got from the authorities.”

Belgium and Italy tried to do it, but the EU pulled them back. Now that we are out of Europe, we can be free of the shackles we once wore and move forward. There is an opportunity for the new UK Administration, under a new leader, to make the difference and make changes.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Surely if we stay in the single market in some way, shape or form, we will still be subject to its rules and regulations.

Jim Shannon: There is much to be discussed after Brexit, and that is one aspect. I am very keen for the debates to start. Let us move forward and be positive—the glass is half full. We are looking forward to supporting our industry and making sure that we can deliver for it.

Let us be positive and upbeat. We now have the power, at least in principle, for the Government to take the necessary steps to ensure that the 11,000 jobs at Port Talbot in particular are kept safe, as well as those throughout the whole United Kingdom, in Scotland and elsewhere. We have to remain positive and consider the new possibility of offering tailor-made Government support. Steel prices are rising, which means that Tata Steel will be in much less of a hurry to sell up and get out of the UK than it once was.

Let us give credit where credit is due: the Government have worked hard and the Minister has been industrious. She has responded to several debates and made very clear, positive comments. I know she is committed to British steel, but we need to see more practical changes. Although the pressure on Tata to sell has been reduced by the array of slightly more positive factors, it is imperative that the Government have in place the contingency plans needed for all possible outcomes.

It is encouraging to see the Business Secretary take such an active and positive role, but we must remember the livelihoods and families at stake. The deliberations on the issue, and the eventual strategies that are delivered, must deliver a British steel industry that succeeds and is here into the infinite future. We must retain the jobs and our position as a manufacturer.

9.59 am

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate. He has been a strong and doughty champion of the steel industry. [Interruption.] Mrs Gillan, I’ll get my coat.

In my contribution, I will focus on the events and the circumstances regarding the pipe mills at Hartlepool. Last week, Tata announced its intention to sell off its Speciality Steels business, including the Hartlepool pipe mills but excluding the 20-inch tube mill. As we have already heard, this is happening in the context of Tata Steel looking to explore the feasibility of strategic collaboration with other European steel operators, perhaps with a joint venture.

In many respects, that is a positive move. The Hartlepool pipe mills are a profitable business unit within Tata. The Minister has seen the operations there for herself. She has seen that the mills have a skilled and committed local workforce that produce high-quality and value-added products for use in a variety of sectors, such as oil and gas, construction and infrastructure. It is little wonder, therefore, that several bidders have already shown an interest in buying Tata’s Speciality Steels business.

However, there is still uncertainty. A sales process of this nature is never straightforward, especially one where a part of a larger group is being divested, so what guarantees can the Minister give to ensure that we can continue operations at the Hartlepool site and that this sales process, which may be lengthy and complex, is concluded successfully?

The Minister has answered questions about this issue before; she knows its importance. However, it is vital that guarantees are given to boost confidence, not only among the workforce about their jobs but in terms of the order book, and in terms of customers and suppliers, to ensure that they continue to trade with the Hartlepool pipe mills; it is important to consider customers and suppliers, too. What can the Government do to increase confidence during this sales process?

In addition, what work has been done, or what assessment has been carried out, in respect of the Hartlepool steelworkers’ pensions? Will they be coming out of the Tata Steel pension scheme? It will be far more difficult to make a much smaller scheme, perhaps one based on Speciality Steels, a viable one. What work is the Minister doing with regard to the pension scheme? In this period of uncertainty, it would be very helpful if she could provide some sort of guarantees or confidence to allow this sales process to be carried out in a successful manner.

In the time I have left, I shall just touch on several broader issues; they have already been referred to in the debate but are incredibly important. There is still an unlevel playing field between ourselves and European operations. Energy costs remain a concern; there is a disparity in energy costs of something like £17 per MWh, even after the energy-intensive industries compensation scheme is taken into account. That means that UK steel producers and manufacturers face an additional cost to make steel, relative to their European rivals, of around £1 million a week. What will be done to level that playing field?

The second point that I will emphasise is the importance of business confidence and capital investment in the wake of Brexit. The vote on 23 June has produced enormous uncertainty, and as a result businesses—quite reasonably and logically—might want to pause their investment plans. They will think, “Let’s just wait until the next quarter, or the quarter after that, before we invest in new plant and machinery.” If we are in a global race for economic progress, we cannot afford to pause for a quarter or two; we will be left behind and consequently our competitiveness will be eroded.

What are the Government doing to ensure that the steel industry can be provided with as much clarity as possible? Can the annual investment allowance scheme,
which has been excellent, be extended and widened? Will business rates be reformed? On the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, we saw how illogical it is that manufacturers, such as steel manufacturers, are being punished by the Government. Manufacturers want to improve their competitiveness by improving their plant and machinery, but if they do so they will be slapped with an additional tax bill. That cannot be good economic sense. I know that the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills did not win the argument with the Treasury about this, but I ask the Minister and indeed the new Government to push further on it to provide the clarity that is needed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth has already talked about the importance of progress with procurement. Achieving such progress remains frustratingly slow. Government policy in this area was changed in October 2015 and again in April, which was welcome, but we need to see the new policy being translated into ongoing orders and activities for steel producers and manufacturers. I ask the Government to step up a gear, to ensure that the policy is not only changed but is active, energetic and vigorous in ensuring that local steel content can be used in all public projects.

This sounds flippant, although it is not meant to, but in many respects we no longer need to worry about state aid, so we can use this period as an opportunity to champion British Steel and to ensure that we have a steel industry that is necessary and valuable for the economy, and that has a real future in the years to come.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. I am very pleased with the timekeeping. I think I have four speakers left and I hope to start the wind-ups at half past 10, so I hope those speakers will divide their remaining time up accordingly.

10.5 am

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this timely and important debate.

I thank the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise for championing, in her own way, the steel industry. We have not always agreed and we have both been combative, but she has been the best champion and the best voice for steel within the Government, and I hope that will continue in some way in the new Government. The challenge that we face after the outcome of the European referendum is keeping steel up there as an issue to be addressed, so that it is not pushed out by other issues. We need to continue building the momentum to deliver a steel strategy for the UK—we have already started to build that momentum.

I was pleased that the new Prime Minister—she is not yet the Prime Minister, but she is incoming—has made it clear that she believes in an active industrial strategy. I very much welcome that commitment from her, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) has just pointed out, there needs to be an active and even interventionist industrial strategy that delivers for steel and for manufacturing. If she provides that type of strategy, I will be the first to lead the hurrahs for her.

In Scunthorpe, we recognise the bright future for the steel industry that my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth talked about, because there is already a bright future in Scunthorpe, thanks to the work of Paul McBean, Ian Smith and Martin Foster, who are on the trade union side and who work with the leadership of British Steel locally. In fact, we were able to launch the new British Steel on 1 June and things are going very well. However, for things to continue to go very well, the steel industry needs the active support of the Government. Progress in a positive way will not just happen, and it will not happen at all unless the Government step up to the plate, which I hope is their intention.

The issues are well known—my hon. Friends have already referred to them. We need to do something about business rates. It is important that they are brought into line with those of European competitors. Currently, British Steel pays around £14 million per annum in business rates and the business rate system does not incentivise investment. In the modern age, that is madness and needs to be dealt with. Business rates for our capital-intensive industries need to be brought into line with those paid by their competitors, by removing plant and machinery from business rate calculations. The new Government need to do that urgently.

There are also electricity charges to consider. The UK steel industry pays double what the German steel industry pays for electricity, which increases its costs at every stage. Again, that needs to be addressed. Something needs to be done to tackle the high energy costs that still exist, either by innovation; by bringing production of energy closer to plants, which can be achieved by incentivising it; or by doing something else.

Much has already been said about procurement, which is vital for the steel industry. The procurement opportunity of leaving the EU needs to be taken advantage of and we also need to ensure that measurement systems are in place to ensure procurement of UK steel for public sector projects. I refer again to the opportunity for the development of offshore wind in the North sea, which is being led by DONG Energy. DONG Energy is being heavily incentivised by subsidies from the British taxpayer, so it would be outrageous if the steel required for that investment came from anywhere other than the UK.

We need to ensure that a pipeline of procurement is clearly in place. That issue must be addressed properly by the Government, so that we know what needs to be developed in terms of steel capacity, and so that we can ensure that the capacity is there in the UK to deliver for the future. That is what we need—a planning process to instil confidence, so that investment can deliver into the future.

I should mention the British Steel pension scheme, because it is incredibly important to my community. It needs to be addressed, sorted and given certainty so that the steel industry as a whole and pensioners in my community have confidence in the future. I would be very concerned if the impact of all the noise and the insistence on dealing properly with the challenge of the outcome of the EU referendum is to push aside the need for a sensible, solid approach to the British Steel pension scheme that puts it on a sustainable footing into the future.
I close by reminding the Minister, who has been a good Minister, that her final job in her role should be to drive things forward from whatever position she has and ensure that whoever succeeds her has the same passion and dynamism that she has shown from time to time and delivers for our steel industry.

10.10 am

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I also give heartfelt congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who not only secured this debate, but has championed at every level the steel industry in his constituency and across the UK. I am very grateful for that.

The result of the EU referendum has led to unparalleled economic and political uncertainty. For the British steel industry, it has come at the worst possible time. We must not allow it to impede the work that has been done and still needs to be done to secure a sustainable future for steel. What steel needs has been explained to the Government time and time again: address the high energy costs; tackle business rates that continue to leave the industry hamstrung; commit to favouring British-produced steel in procurement; and act on the cheap dumped steel that has contributed to the severity of the crisis.

The Brexit vote may have reduced our ability to act, but we must commit to working with our European partners to ensure a co-ordinated and credible response. Tata Steel’s recent change of course in strategy for its British business in light of the referendum vote presents dangers and opportunities, particularly for Speciality Steels, which is based in Rotherham and Stocksbridge. It is a tremendous asset to the British economy.

There is an unfortunate tendency to view the British steel industry as a relic—an industrial throwback to a different economic age. That could not be further from the truth for the whole industry, but especially for Speciality Steels. Speciality Steels is a world-leading business at the cutting edge of technology and expertise. It produces steel for the most complex roles, from aerospace to motorsports. Members may have watched the British grand prix, where the cars had steel from Rotherham and Stocksbridge in them. The division’s list of customers speaks for itself, running from Rolls-Royce to Lockheed Martin and from Boeing to BAE. Rotherham also houses Tata’s research centre, which continues to develop world-leading advances in steel production and technology to meet the most difficult demands.

However, that vibrant and dynamic business cannot continue to lead the world with one hand tied behind its back. We must act on the underlying problems the industry faces as a whole. Tata’s announcement that the division is to be sold separately is cautiously welcomed. Speciality Steels is a great asset, and I am sure a number of bidders will be forthcoming, but we must make certain that the right buyer and not just any buyer is found to allow the business to continue to thrive. This can be no fire sale. I understand from press reports that there has already been some interest from potential buyers for the business. Given the new circumstances, I would appreciate it if the Minister updated us on the implications that the latest move by Tata will have on Speciality Steels in south Yorkshire.

Tata’s Speciality Steels unit could be a fantastic investment opportunity for someone. As well as producing some of the best steel in the world and being at the cutting edge of innovative and highly profitable steel products such as powdered steel, it has a highly regarded workforce in Stocksbridge and Rotherham. It will have a tremendous future with the right investment. Training and support for staff needs to be provided where necessary. Support to enable the business to weather any short-term turbulence that may result from the sale is also needed. What commitments can the Minister give to support the sale process of Speciality Steels and ensure that it is managed effectively and in a timely manner? The written ministerial statement from the Secretary of State on Monday hinted at providing financial support to help the process. Will the Minister provide details of any possible support? Also, will she place on record today that the Government stand by their commitments made on 21 April 2016, which detailed hundreds of millions of pounds of support in a package for potential buyers of Tata’s UK business?

Madam Gillan, another area of great concern has been the sizeable pension liabilities, especially the old British Steel liabilities. [Interruption.] Sorry.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. I quite like “Madam Gillan”.

Sarah Champion: Okay—I ask Members to follow that.

Does the Minister envisage separate solutions for these liabilities? Can she give Members any details of what support the Government may offer any potential buyer of Speciality Steels? It is well known that, for Speciality Steels to maintain its dominant market position, significant capital investment is needed to move up the value chain. Can the Government offer any support or loans to potential buyers of Speciality Steels to ensure that investment in innovation, and in research and development, continues at its current pace or, indeed, is increased?

Speciality Steels has a bright future, and I am confident that the right buyer will quickly come forward. I know that the city region and Sheffield and Rotherham councils are determined to do whatever they can to help the business. The Government have repeatedly claimed to be committed to steel. That commitment must not slip, despite the economic obstacles we face. With the right support and nurturing, British steel can continue to lead the world in quality and technology with a dedicated, experienced and well trained workforce. The Government must not take their eye off the ball at this critical time. I join with my colleagues in urging them to act, and act now, to safeguard a viable, sustainable and successful future for British steel production.

10.16 am

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing today’s debate. I also pay tribute to the fantastic workforce of steelworkers across the country, many of whom are represented here with us today. It is an honour to have those gentlemen here.

The past few weeks have been characterised by uncertainty, particularly since the referendum result: economic uncertainty with the pound falling, investment put on hold and jobs at risk; party-political uncertainty;
and governmental uncertainty and paralysis. That uncertainty has been particularly acute for the steel industry. When Tata announced on Friday that it was putting the sale of Strip Products UK on the back burner as it explored the possibility of forming a joint venture with ThyssenKrupp, the workforce and their families clearly reacted with a degree of scepticism and concern. The announcement compounded existing uncertainties. ThyssenKrupp has long expressed interest in Tata’s Dutch plant, but until last week there was no convincing evidence of any interest in Tata Steel’s UK operations. The central concern around the joint venture proposal, particularly with Britain outside the EU, is that the UK operations, including Port Talbot in my constituency, might not receive the support and investment they require. Clear assurances are required from the Government, Tata and ThyssenKrupp that the mooted joint venture will in no way diminish Port Talbot and the rest of the Strip Products UK division.

The uncertainties of the sale process have been compounded by Brexit and the resulting Whitehall paralysis. What we need now, on the day that a new Prime Minister enters No. 10, is a Government truly committed to the industry and its future. Like the Minister, I was a passionate campaigner for remain, but the British people voted to leave, and we must now deliver on and make the most of the mandate they have given us. To do that, we must urgently clarify the nature of our trading relationship with the EU27. I hope that the incoming Prime Minister will fully engage with the industry and parties on both sides of the House when determining the approach to Brexit negotiations.

The top priority is surely energy costs, which have been cited by leading figures in the industry as the No. 1 challenge facing British steel competitiveness. At present, there is a £17 per megawatt-hour differential between the energy costs for Germany and Britain, and that is after the energy compensation package is taken into account. Energy costs in this country are quite simply astronomical, and the Government should and must act.

At the Steel Council on 8 June, the Secretary of State was receptive to the industry proposals, with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Department of Energy and Climate Change pledging to come back with “urgency” on energy costs. Well, we are still waiting. Will the Minister do all she can, in whatever time she has left in her post, to expedite the process? What the industry cannot take is more delay and uncertainty. Steel is a foundation industry, critical to the houses in which we live, the offices in which we work, the cars we drive and the bridges we cross. It is the beating heart of economies and communities such as the one that I represent. That is why we need a resilient steel industry that can compete on a level playing field. The UK steel industry is the beating heart of Neath for more than a century, defining its communities and those who have had their lives touched by those industries.

Of the 1,050 jobs lost in the UK steel industry since the year began, 750 have been lost from Port Talbot—and on top of the 400 jobs lost in 2014. The extent of this decline could have been slowed, shrunk or even prevented had the Tory Government taken up the offers of support that have come from Europe. The forerunner of the European Union, the European Coal and Steel Community, was set up not only to cement peace, but to help economic growth by pooling resources and preventing unnecessary competition. Such planning and collaboration saw the UK steel industry become world leading not only in size but in quality.

The latest industrial revolution taking place in China may be the biggest of all. In 2013, China produced 779 million tonnes of steel, or 48% of worldwide output. The UK produced 12 million tonnes. But as members of a strong European Union, we were in a position to embody the very reason for the EU in the first place: strength in numbers, collective planning, a common purpose. Had the UK Government allowed, we could have installed anti-dumping tariffs on Chinese steel. We could have lifted the lesser duty tariff and applied for crucial EU funds, which would have shored up the industry during these difficult times.

More than half of UK steel exports are to the European single market. What will happen to those exports as a result of the recent referendum? I fear that the impact of tariffs or an elongated trade agreement may signal the death knell of an industry already fighting to compete on a level global playing field. The UK steel industry has declined by 42% between 1990 and 2014 in real terms. Economic output in 1990 was £2.7 billion compared with £1.7 billion in 2014. How can we halt this decline without the support of our European partners, automatic access to a ready-made single market, or the potential of additional funding to tackle rising energy costs and environmental commitments?

We also have organisations that innovate and produce high-tech products that are changing the way we view steel. Neath Port Talbot is home to a company called SPECIFIC—Sustainable Product Engineering Centre for Innovative Functional Industrial Coatings—which uses Tata coated steel to make world-leading, innovative technologies that produce, store and release energy. SPECIFIC is hugely concerned about the prospect of leaving Europe, not least because of the essential funding it has received, without which it probably would not exist, but also because of the potential loss of a market where it could promote and sell its products. And let us not forget the steel that we import from the EU, which...
makes up 69% of our imports; it is not made in the UK, but is vital to many key industries that produce specialised products, infrastructure and new construction projects. It is not a matter of whether Brexit will have implications for the UK steel industry, but the extent of them. Exports will be hit hard, output will be slashed, jobs will be lost and communities will be forsaken. I fear for the future of the UK steel industry in a UK outside the European Union, and I call on the Minister and the Government to do all that they can to protect it.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Thank you. We will now move to the wind-ups.

10.25 am

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Gillan. I want to start on a conciliatory note and very much congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate. I have spoken a number of times on this issue. I congratulate Members of all parties on the work they have done, including the Minister who has been working in very difficult circumstances. However, without recycling too many of the arguments, it is important that we focus on what we can do as a result of the Brexit vote. It is important to point out, as my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) did, that we voted differently in Scotland and are looking to protect Scotland’s place in Europe. Our First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, and the Scottish steel taskforce have been working very hard on that, and I pay tribute to all the steelworkers across the country who have lost their jobs as a result of the challenges facing the industry.

Some Members have picked up on the issue of pensions. We have seen various businesses, including the likes of BHS, do significant damage to our reputation as a country in terms of what they have done with pensions. It is very important that the steelworkers have their pensions protected and that in any negotiations the Government are a great champion of that.

I want to bust a couple of myths that the hon. Gentleman and other Labour Members will, the tragedy of the closure of Ravenscraig and what that did. I hope the hon. Gentleman will recognise the shoulders on which he stands and the work done by Labour members in Scotland, by the SNP and those across the political spectrum who fought to keep that plant open, but were not successful. That plant, until it was closed in 1992 by a Conservative Government, was the largest hot strip steel mill in western Europe. It is because of that closure that we are not able to produce the kind of steel that we would like to. That is a great tragedy. I hope the hon. Gentleman recognises that.

As I said, I want to be conciliatory in this debate because a huge amount of work has been done. For us in Scotland, there was concern about the potential closure of the Dalzell and Clydebridge plants, which was going to cost us more than 2,700 jobs. However, the Scottish Government established the Scottish steel taskforce, which brought together people from across sectors: local authorities, trade unions, the UK Government, Scottish Enterprise and more. It is also important to note the involvement and engagement that the Scottish Government had with the unions from an early stage. By contrast, I am afraid to say, with the UK Government. The First Minister said at the time of the sale to Liberty House, which is to be congratulated on its involvement and enthusiasm in taking over the steel plants in Scotland, that if there was any learning and experience that we could share with Port Talbot, we would be happy to do so. I hope the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who has been a significant champion for his constituency, will take up that offer.

The hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) spoke about energy prices and the impact on her constituency. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is a regular feature and I believe one of the greatest contributors in Westminster Hall debates, spoke passionately. Although he does not have a steel industry in his constituency, he wants to offer support and takes a glass-half-full approach. It is important that we take such an approach. There are many issues and challenges and it will be interesting to hear the Minister’s view. We do not know how long she may have left in her current role, but how does she see the negotiations with Europe going for the UK and what kind of trade agreements can we expect to see? As we know, the pound has fallen, which means that UK steel will be cheaper to foreign buyers, and that could boost demand. On the other hand, a lower pound means that imports will be more expensive. Imported coal and iron ore are used in some of Tata’s UK operations, so that is a concern. I would be particularly interested to hear the Minister’s thoughts on what will be done in that regard.

Jonathan Edwards: I am very interested in the point that, theoretically, the fall in sterling in normal economic times would help exports. The big issue is uncertainty—uncertainty in economics is toxic. Surely now we need an urgent statement from the Government that we will go for EEA status, to preserve our status within the single market. That would be one way of securing investment in steel.

Hannah Bardell: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. He will know that joining the EEA and taking on those agreements would also include accepting the free movement of people. Most of us in the Opposition parties would agree that that would be positive, but, as we know, there are many on the Government Benches who disagree. This is a time of great uncertainty. It is simply unacceptable that there was no plan—as we read in the newspapers, things were thought about but not written down—and I think that everybody in British industry will be looking at that situation in shock.

The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) spoke about action on cheap, dumped steel and what can be done on tariffs, which a number of other hon. Members also raised. The hon. Lady also raised the issue of pension liabilities and her concerns for her constituents.

It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to the work done by the unions and the devolved Administrations. Many workers are looking on, wondering what is going to happen to their jobs. At a time such as this, it is very important that we find consensus where we can. There will be differences of opinions and policies across the
Happening in the steel industry. Even today in the midst of everything else that is going on and—in some cases—years to try to protect the vitally important strategic industry of steel.

I also congratulate the trade unions on their work representing their members and the communities that they live in, in these incredibly difficult times. We have seen examples of the benefits of partnership working between local politicians, the devolved Governments, local Government and the representatives of working people in those communities.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to pay tribute to the trade unions and all those who have worked in partnership. Will he join me in paying tribute to the work of the Daily Mirror and its “Save our Steel” campaign? It has kept a focus on the issue, its “Save our Steel” campaign has raised awareness among the wider public of just how important steel is to the whole country.

We express regret that the Government did not act in a stronger way to try to save Redcar and that there was not greater engagement earlier on Redcar and elsewhere, but we have to focus on where the steel industry is and what can be done now, not least given the challenges following the vote to leave the European Union.

Steel has faced a profound crisis for quite some time. Plants that had been in profitable production for decades have closed. In Redcar, that brought to an end a century of the steelworks used to be far bigger. Many still live in the area, so the change in spending power over time will affect not only them but the whole area. We have to think about that as well.

Britain’s relationship to the EU and the rest of the world is now more unsettled than it has been for many generations. We have seen the immediate impact of the vote not just in the steel industry, but in this industry we have seen the planned sale of the Port Talbot steelworks put on hold. An estimated 15,000 jobs are directly at stake, with another 40,000 immediately affected through the supply chain. Then there are the risks, which my hon. Friends have raised, from the impact on the British Steel pension fund—that threatens the prosperity of more than 130,000 workers, and of course there is the threatened loss of a vital strategic industry. The time is now for decisive Government action to secure as much stability and certainty as possible.

Before the leave vote, the Government had started to act and to recognise, quite rightly, the strategic importance of the steel industry in this country. That recognition had included the potential for the Government to take a stake in the Port Talbot works—the Business Secretary had dropped his previous opposition to responsible ownership and had, at last, understood the importance of Government intervention in industry. As part of any deal, however, he was proposing to switch the indexing of British Steel pensions from the retail prices index measure of inflation to the far lower consumer prices index measure. Over time that would have amounted to a 15% cut in pensions being paid, and, as well as affecting the prosperity of British Steel pensioners, it suggested opening the door to similar pension raids in other sectors.

The proposal has quite rightly been resisted by the unions and also, notably, by other Government Departments. Addressing the crisis in steel at the expense of pensioners is simply not acceptable. Supporting our steel industry will require the Government to follow best practice from north America and Europe, and to develop an effective industrial strategy to support the industry. It will require willingness from the Government to support the pension fund.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside): I want to say that the pension fund—that threatens the prosperity of British Steel pensioners, it could amount to a 15% cut in pensions being paid, and, as well as affecting the prosperity of British Steel pensioners, it suggested opening the door to similar pension raids in other sectors.

The proposal has quite rightly been resisted by the unions and also, notably, by other Government Departments. Addressing the crisis in steel at the expense of pensioners is simply not acceptable. Supporting our steel industry will require the Government to follow best practice from north America and Europe, and to develop an effective industrial strategy to support the industry. It will require willingness from the Government to support the pension fund.

Bill Esterson: Absolutely. Any money taken away from pensioners affects the rest of the economy, including other businesses and the livelihoods of many other people. My hon. Friend is quite right that those considerations need to be carefully taken into account.

In his excellent speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth said that the vote to leave the European Union has been a body blow that has put uncertainty on top of the existing difficulties. I will remind the Minister of some of my hon. Friend’s questions. He wanted to know what the Government will do differently now and made the point that time is of the essence—the steel industry simply cannot wait for the new Prime Minister to take time to act. As my hon. Friend said, the Government need to continue working, and to step up that work, with local MPs, the devolved Assembly, local government and the unions. They need to move away from the laissez-faire approach we have seen in previous times. When my hon. Friend was making that point, the Minister was waving her hand dismissively, as she is sometimes wont to do. That is simply not the response that is needed on this critical issue.

My hon. Friend also said that access to the single market is essential. We heard in an intervention about the importance for Members of all parties of retaining that access. That is true not just for steel but for businesses in many other industries, too—not least those that are part of the steel supply chain, whether in manufacturing, construction or defence. We need to know what the options are for retaining that support. What action will
the Government take to ensure that the supply chain will continue to be supported by UK steel production? What action will they take to ensure that raw material prices are not adversely affected, and that there is not the impact that my hon. Friend talked about?

My hon. Friend mentioned exchange rates and said that the benefits will be offset by import costs. He and I are both aware that those concerns are real but, as the Chair said, they are not the whole story. My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) talked about the impact of the carbon price floor changes. We heard about the impact of business rates and the need for action on energy costs more generally. Will the Minister tell us exactly what she or her potential successor will do to take action on those points?

On the issue of procurement, the steel for the Aberdeen bypass—it was a £12 million contract—was made in Turkey, not Scotland or elsewhere in the UK.

Jonathan Edwards: I was not going to make any tribal statements, but the Western Mail, the national paper of Wales, last month exposed the fact that the Welsh Government have been using rebar steel from Germany for a road project—the Eastern Bay link road in Cardiff—less than a mile from where rebar is produced by Celsa in the Cardiff South and Penarth constituency.

Bill Esterson: That is the first I have heard of that.

Jonathan Edwards: You should read the Western Mail.

Bill Esterson: Unfortunately, the Western Mail does not find its way to Merseyside very often.

Jonathan Edwards: It is a fine paper.

Bill Esterson: I am sure it is a fine paper.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth asked about the Steel Council. Will the Minister confirm what discussions are taking place and what work it is continuing to do after the Brexit vote? It has a critical role in the next few weeks and months.

I am conscious that the Minister has a lot to respond to, but I want to reiterate the importance of what my hon. Friend said. Government action is needed now. The steel industry, the workers, the supply chain, the businesses directly affected and the rest of the economy cannot wait weeks or months for action. Steel is crucial to our economy, our strategic needs and our communities. It is important that we secure tariff-free access to the European Union. We cannot wait weeks or months for action. Steel is crucial to our economy, our strategic needs and our communities.

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The United Kingdom steel sector exported 6.3 million tonnes of steel last year, 3.3 million tonnes of which went to European Union member states. That is how important the EU is to the exporting of steel. Access to the single market is absolutely critical, not just for steel but for the whole of our economy.

The automotive sector has been a massive success story in recent years. We have exported a huge number of cars—many of which are made with British steel—to EU markets. I went to Nissan only the other week, and we were reminded that 45% of the steel that it uses is made here in Britain. That is the point that the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth was making. I gently say to the Scottish National party and the Scottish Government that it is not just processing that is so important. It is also important that we buy British-made steel—steel that is made in Port Talbot or Scunthorpe, not Turkey.

It is right, good and fair to say—I am going to be a bit partisan here—that it is very much to the credit of my party that we have avoided the uncertainty that we undoubtedly would have had if we had waited until September to elect a new leader and install a new Prime Minister. That would not have been the best thing for our country or, indeed, our economy and our steel industry. We absolutely need certainty, and my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) did everybody an enormous favour with her greatly courageous decision. We now have a new Prime Minister who can, frankly, get on and do all the things that need to be done to create certainty. She can answer many of the questions that I cannot answer, because this is a matter for the new Prime Minister and her Government.

In the words of the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), Brexit is a fact. It might hurt us but, as he rightly said, it is the will of the British people. At least we know where we are on that. We have a big task ahead of us, and I am sure nobody here is under any illusions about the scale of the complexity that we face as we withdraw from the European Union. It will take a number of years and it will be hugely complicated, but we are beginning. We will see stability and confidence return to the economy, and that will have a great impact on our steel industry.

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I do not know whether you have had the great pleasure of chairing a steel debate before, but I know that you have family connections in Wales. The majority of the speakers in this excellent debate are from Wales—a part of the United Kingdom that is very dear to your heart—so welcome to the gang. As you will have gathered, we regularly meet here or in the main Chamber to debate this issue with all its twists and turns. It is fair to say that, the last time we debated this issue, none of us anticipated that the next time that we gathered for a debate it would be on this subject.

I pay huge tribute, as ever, to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this debate. I will not have time to address all of the points that have been raised, but I will try to stick to the actual topic of the debate, which is the effect of Brexit on the steel industry.

It is right, good and fair to say—I am going to be a bit partisan here—that it is very much to the credit of my party that we have avoided the uncertainty that we undoubtedly would have had if we had waited until September to elect a new leader and install a new Prime Minister. That would not have been the best thing for our country or, indeed, our economy and our steel industry. We absolutely need certainty, and my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) did everybody an enormous favour with her greatly courageous decision. We now have a new Prime Minister who can, frankly, get on and do all the things that need to be done to create certainty. She can answer many of the questions that I cannot answer, because this is a matter for the new Prime Minister and her Government.

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It is important that we secure tariff-free access to the European market, not just for the steel sector but for the parts of our economy that buy British steel, such as the automotive sector. I have personally spoken to the important people at all the large automotive companies to reassure them and to tell them how critical it is that they keep putting in orders to Port Talbot, and they told me that tariff-free access is important for their sector.

Jonathan Edwards: The Minister mentioned the complexities following the referendum result for export strategy. What analysis have the UK Government done
[Jonathan Edwards]
to date of the countries that UK-based steel producers export to? How many trade deals are now going to have to be renegotiated so those exports can continue?

Anna Soubry: I do not know about the actual figures, but we have looked at that with considerable care, and we will continue to do so. A special unit has been set up, and—if I can put it this way—will be beefed up by the incoming Prime Minister. Those are exactly the sort of issues and complexities that we are going to have to deal with.

Let me make it very clear that, until we actually leave the EU, we are a member of the EU. I think some people think we have left. Well, we have not left. We are still subject to all its rules and regulations—for example, the state aid rules—and we have access to the single market. Those things are incredibly important throughout the process that will now unfold. While we remain a member of the EU, we are subject to the state aid rules, the trade defence measures and so on. What replaces those rules—we may remain subject to them in return for market access—is for the new Prime Minister and her team to negotiate. Whatever my role is—I may end up on the Back Benches—[HON. MEMBERS: “No!”] The worst nightmare of the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), who has been my hon. Friend on many occasions, is that I return to the Back Benches and then end up on his Select Committee.

Mr Wright: No, no!

Anna Soubry: I think we are all becoming demob happy. We are looking forward to next week when we will have a short break, but we will all continue, as we always do, to work for our constituents in the so-called recess. I think that other people sometimes forget that.

Stephen Doughty: The Minister is making some good jokes; however, this is a very serious point. Although we are about to go into a parliamentary recess, it is absolutely crucial that the meetings with the Steel Council and the working groups continue and that the work with the officials goes on. We cannot afford to let weeks go by in the summer when the industry is facing so many challenges.

Anna Soubry: I could not agree with the hon. Gentleman more. He is absolutely right, and he needs to know that the Steel Council has been working as if nothing has happened or changed ever since the referendum vote. Indeed, the UK Metals Council is meeting now—that is where I would have been had he not secured this debate. Everyone involved in the sector needs to understand that the work of the Government, Ministers and my officials has continued through this recent period and, without doubt, will continue through the summer. If I stay in my job, he can be assured that I will continue to do everything I can to work for the best interests of our steel industry; if I have a successor, that person will do exactly the same. The officials, of course, do not change. Furthermore, the determination will be as instilled in the new Prime Minister as it has been in our outgoing Prime Minister.

To deal quickly with procurement, we changed the rules, and we were the first member state of the EU to do that, commendably so. However, Opposition Members make a good point about the need now to ensure real evidence that those rules are working. We need good reporting, so that we can come back to say that we are absolutely certain that the new procurement rules are producing the results we want.

Network Rail sources 98% of its steel domestically, or 145,000 tonnes over the next five years, and there is no reason to believe that that will change. High Speed 2 will need 2 million tonnes of steel over the next 10 years—forgive me, Mrs Gillan, but I am a huge supporter of HS2 and I fear our friendship will be wobbling here. I assure you and all hon. Members that I will continue to do everything I can in Government to make the case for wonderful and important infrastructure projects to be brought forward as much as they can be, as it will be a great boost for our economy if we can do that.

I have spoken with steel makers since the referendum, although it was not the result they wanted. It was sad that 69.6% of people in Hartlepool voted out; 60% of people in Cardiff voted in, but in Sheffield, 51% voted out; in Rotherham, 67.9% voted out; even in Neath Port Talbot, 56.8% voted out; and in the constituency represented so ably by the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), nearly 70% voted out. We all have a big, big job to do—but we can talk about that on another occasion. Only last week, however, I met British Steel, and things are going well notwithstanding—I do not want to be overly confident, but it is on track to deliver its business plan.

I want to deal with the point made by the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) and by the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). Yesterday, I had a good meeting to discuss—freely—the situation in Stocksbridge and Rotherham. The Secretary of State has written in response to the right hon. Gentleman’s letter, although that reply might not yet have been received. For his and the hon. Lady’s benefit, the Secretary of State wrote:

“To date, no such requests have been made by any of the potential bidders, but we would be willing to consider requests that are made in the future.”

We know that people will be interested in the speciality steels, and rightly so, because it is a cracking business, with huge potential. Hon. Members can be assured that if we get requests to enable those sales to support that side of the sector, we absolutely will do it.

John Healey: Will the Minister give way?

Anna Soubry: I will take one intervention, but quickly, or I shall be in big trouble.

John Healey: I thank the Minister for giving way and for her response. May I ask her to thank the Secretary of State for his response, and to let her successor, if there is one, and his successor, if there is one, know that we as South Yorkshire MPs will be holding the Government to that commitment?

Anna Soubry: I did not doubt that for one moment, and I thank him.

The situation with Tata and the potential deal with ThyssenKrupp has raised several issues, notably that of pensions, about which hon. Members rightly have concerns. I have to say that the Opposition spokesman—this is a matter for the Department for Work and Pensions—did
not make the most supportive contribution, but more than 4,000 consultees have taken part in the Government consultation. It will take time to go through all that, but the Government have always said that we will do everything we can to support the production of steel in south Wales, which means ensuring that at least one of those blast furnaces remains open.

As ever, the clock is against me, but the usual rules apply, and I will reply by letter to any questions that have been asked but I have not been able to answer. I again congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth on securing the debate, and I assure him that wherever I am in the Government I will certainly continue to fight for the British steel industry to be sustainable and to continue making steel. I want to ensure that the case is taken forward, so we have that sustainable steel industry.

The hon. Member for Hartlepool looks as if he wants some reassurance, and he can have it. I have been to Hartlepool—I have been to almost all the steel mills throughout Britain, and apparently I will get one of those “I-Spy” badges as a result, if I come to the end of my tenure. It will be a proud moment, and I will wear it with great pride. Hartlepool is another viable business and, again, we will be there when buyers come forward. If they need support or want to talk to Government, we will do everything we can. Notwithstanding the referendum result, let us put some confidence back and say that we will create—or, rather, maintain—a sustainable steel industry. I will do everything I can, wherever I might be, to support it.

10.55 am

Stephen Doughty: I thank the Minister for some of the things she said, which were confidence-boosting and provide some hopeful direction. We must all want to take her up on her suggestion—whether she is in the role or not—because that is a clear signal to send to her successor, if there is one, to the successor of the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, if there is one, and to the new Prime Minister that this issue will not go away. It requires serious, concrete ministerial attention—not just officials—to drive it forward over the weeks and months to come. If we get distracted by everything else going on, the industry will face serious troubles.

I have three points to make, the first about energy costs, which the Minister did not get into in great detail—she is welcome to intervene, if she wants. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) that figure of £17 per megawatt-hour differential between the energy costs faced here and across the EU. In particular, that is an issue for companies such as Celsa in my constituency, which operate throughout the European Union and see the energy costs in other countries. Perhaps the Minister will intervene or write to us, but I want to understand whether she would be satisfied for the differential to continue over any length of time.

Anna Soubry: I forgot this, but the hon. Gentleman makes a good point. A lot of work is still to be done on energy. A major target and piece of work for the incoming Government is to ensure that the steel industry—indeed, all the manufacturing sector—has a level playing field, and that must be achieved.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the Minister for her comments, which I hope she will also express clearly to the Department of Energy and Climate Change, other Departments and the new Prime Minister.

On another fundamental issue, the debate was about the impact of Brexit and the referendum decision on the steel industry, and the Minister and other colleagues who have taken part in the debate today have outlined the potential risks if we do not get the right sort of deal. Access to the single market is crucial. Some have suggested that we should invoke article 50 straightaway and rush into the negotiations, but that would be foolish—I see the Minister nodding. Even some in my own party have suggested that, but it would be wholly wrong. We need to take a very careful approach, for the sake of the industry. The deal has to be the right one; we have to secure access for our exports, and to ensure that we do not end up with punitive shocks, because even if those were only in existence for three or six months in transition from one regime to another, they could be devastating to the industry.

To conclude, I thank all colleagues who have attended today, because it shows the great concern for the steel industry in Parliament. No matter what else is going on and that we are having a change of Prime Minister today; colleagues are still willing to attend and to stand up for constituents and the steel industry throughout the UK. I thank all those in the industry, whether in the trade unions, the management or the industry bodies, who continue to fight the fight and to make the case that steel does have a future, and that the Government need to act to ensure that future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the implications for the UK steel industry of the outcome of the EU referendum.
Stevens-Johnson Syndrome and Toxic Epidermal Necrolysis

11 am

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered awareness and funding for treatment of Stevens-Johnson syndrome and toxic epidermal necrolysis.

It is a delight to move a motion under your chairmanship for the first time, Mrs Gillan, and I am grateful to the Speaker for selecting this issue for debate. I am also grateful to the Minister and look forward to having a positive exchange with him.

I had never heard of Stevens-Johnson syndrome or toxic epidermal necrolysis—my pronunciation of some of these medical terms may leave a little to be desired—until my constituent Nadier Lawson, who had suffered from the condition, contacted me. She has set up an awareness group, SJS Awareness UK, which is based in my constituency. It was because of her and that group that I asked for the debate.

SJS—and its much more severe form, TEN—is a severe reaction that affects the skin. It is caused by a whole range of standard medicines that we all use regularly. The reaction is most commonly caused by drugs used to treat epilepsy; some antibiotics, such as penicillin and sulphonamides; over-the-counter drugs such as ibuprofen; and medications that are commonly used to treat HIV and gout. The adverse reaction triggered by those drugs is devastating. I have seen pictures of children and adults who have had such a reaction, and they are truly shocking. People start with a skin rash, which rapidly develops into excruciating blistering across their skin, which starts to peel off. The condition particularly attacks the mucus membranes in the body—in the mouth, eyes, nasal passages and guts—and is similar to having third-degree burns on the skin. The condition is classified according to how much of the body surface is blistered: if it is less than 10%, the condition is called Stevens-Johnson syndrome; if it is 11% to 30%, it is called overlap syndrome; and if it is over 30%, it is called toxic epidermal necrolysis.

The initial symptoms that people experience are non-specific. Someone can take a pill one day and feel nothing for up to a week or two but then start to feel unwell and develop a rash, which is often assumed to be chicken pox, and may experience flu-like symptoms. A key problem associated with the condition is that all too often, it takes far too long to identify. Obviously, the first thing to do is to stop taking the medication that is causing the condition. Failure to identify the condition early enough can lead to terrible lasting effects, including permanent damage to the eyes—resulting at its most extreme in blindness—and lungs, loss of nail beds, arthritis and chronic fatigue syndrome. At the very worst, people die. Around one in 10 people with SJS, the mildest form of the condition, and up to a quarter of those with TEN, the most severe form of the condition, die.

I have a whole lot of case studies, but I thought it worth reading out just one, which was given by a young man who came to an event that I held in the House to bring together people who had experienced the condition. He is called Stuart Doyle, and he wrote and said this:

"Nine years ago I had a TENS reaction. I burned from the inside out and lost around 95% of my skin, all through second and third degree burns with permanent scarring. My finger and toenails burned off and have never grown back. The enamel on my teeth burned away. Mouth, throat, lungs and stomach all burned. My eyes burned and ulcerated, then fused to my upper and lower eyelids. My tear film was destroyed, as was my tear production and I lost all saliva production too. I also had inner ear burning and am now partially deaf in one ear. My genitals burned."

I will skip a bit and give just a summary of what he said and wrote. He continued:

"I spent six weeks in a ketamine-induced coma, which I was placed in just two days after I arrived at my first hospital. I arrived with what seemed to be meningitis, it was textbook and it was moving fast. Two days later my oxygen SATS had dropped to the point where brain damage had begun its process. They acted quickly; they had already started treating me, my son, and my partner for meningitis. It wasn’t until after the lumbar puncture results came back, that they realised it was not what they first thought it was.

The high doses of anti-biotics were stopped, by this point my throat and lungs had begun burning and blistering and a rash now covered more than half of my body. It was the lungs and throat burning that had begun to close up my airways and provoked the need for a ventilator to keep my brain intact. The ketamine-induced coma was to try and get my heart rate back down from the 180 beats per minute mark caused by the pain of the internal burning. If they’d not done that, I’d have certainly died from cardiac arrest there and then. I was to stay in the coma on full life support for six weeks; my total hospital stay was three months. I woke up in a different city."

He goes on to describe how the condition has impacted his life, saying:

"I hoped I’d die, I wished every night for 3 years after my reaction that I’d not wake again. I had more surgeries than I can recall, my eyes were in a terrible state."

This is the treatment that he requires today:

"My eyes require a tremendous amount of work. My day starts before 6am and ends around midnight. I have to change my lenses at least 20 times a day, put in more than 100 drops, both lubricants and steroids, and then there is the ever present pain. But, it’s totally worth the effort and I am so lucky, and grateful for all the work that my doctors put in to get me to here."

He then says:

"The hardest thing about my new life, is the chronic pain."

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on raising awareness of this issue. As far as I am aware, this is the first time that this condition has been brought to the attention of Westminster Hall and the Minister. The background information about the condition indicates that it can be triggered by normal medicines such as paracetamol. Is it time for the Minister and the NHS to address the issue by raising awareness of the condition among GPs, consultants and everyone else? The condition affects only one or two people in every million, but it is an important issue.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I completely agree. We are raising awareness through the debate, and I hope that the Minister will take action so we can get early identification and therefore prevent people from suffering the condition’s worst impacts.

The condition is rare, and therein lies the problem. I would appreciate it if the Minister addressed the following issues. There is a lack of awareness among many medical professionals, who just do not come across the condition. Insufficient attention is paid to the condition and its...
The mum of a 13-year-old son, who lives in Surrey, says:

“Of course we thought he had chicken pox. He was screaming because his skin was so raw. I felt helpless. Nobody could tell us what was happening because nobody knew about it.”

Debbie Hazel was misdiagnosed three times, as doctors thought she had chicken pox. She says:

“One of the problems was the lack of knowledge doctors have about the condition.”

The truth is that the debate on this condition shows up a wider issue throughout the biomedical research community. The more we know about disease and how patients respond to drugs, the more we realise how many conditions there are. We discover them literally on an almost daily basis, as they have different hallmark symptoms and present in different ways and at different ages. They are standard medications, which we do not even think about using. We need to raise our awareness and faster pace, and that is changing the way drug identification and treatment of the condition is not a postcode lottery. SJ Syndrome Awareness has asked me to ask the Minister whether we could have an SJ Awareness week for the general public. We are talking about such regularly used medicines—Optrex, ibuprofen, penicillin. They are standard medications, which we do not even think about using. We need to raise our awareness about the potential side effects.

Finally, because the condition is rare, money for research on it is limited. However, there is a cost to the NHS from not understanding the condition or recognising it early and understanding how to treat it. I understand the cost of treating skin reactions is about £500 million a year and it simply makes economic sense, as well as being a question of people’s lives, of course, to use research to get better at understanding why some people have such a reaction to drugs. An interesting key finding on genetic testing is that, in China, there is a gene in the population that predisposes people to different types of skin reaction, putting them at a higher risk from the medications concerned—they are standard. I have a file full of tragic cases of people affected by Stevens-Johnson syndrome, yet many people would not have a clue what we are debating. I ask the Minister, therefore, to do some practical things: to help us to raise awareness; to improve the training and development of all medical professionals, so that they understand the syndrome; and to get money for research so that we can understand the causes and prevent recurrences of this terrible condition in our population.

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan, not least because on other occasions you have been a doughty champion of campaigns on rare diseases. It is also a pleasure to respond to the debate. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) on obtaining it and thank her for raising the issue. It is my great privilege as the Minister for rare diseases to be educated every time we have such a debate. A process of huge preparations is triggered in the Department, so already, just by raising the issue, the right hon. Lady has struck a blow and alerted the machine to the condition and its causes. However, I want to go further.

Perhaps, as this is the day when we say farewell to the Prime Minister, I may pay tribute to his personal leadership in the field of medical research, and to his unleashing of UK leadership, building on what happened under previous Administrations. The Labour Government did a lot of great work setting up the National Institute for Health Research, but because of the Prime Minister’s experience with genetic conditions in his family he has been an incredible champion of genomics and of rare disease science and research. As he leaves I want to state that that is one of his great legacies. It has been my privilege to be his first Minister for Life Sciences, with the purpose of driving forward that quiet revolution and UK leadership.

I also want to pay tribute to SJ Syndrome Awareness. As with so many rare conditions, it is charities and patient groups, the patients and victims of diseases, who take the early steps in speaking up, raising money, raffling tins, having raffles and raising awareness, which in the end lead, as I see often, to huge progress and advances in research and treatment. I encourage them to continue and not to give up. I hope that what I will say will send a good signal.

The truth is that the debate on this condition shows up a wider issue throughout the biomedical research community. The more we know about disease and how patients respond to drugs, the more we realise how many conditions there are. We discover them literally each month through the UK genome project, at a faster and faster pace, and that is changing the way drug discovery works, and the way the system thinks of conditions. The old model of diagnosing on a standard understanding of X number of conditions with clear
The Government take the issue of rare disease treatment incredibly seriously, and that is why we have worked with NHS England on launching the UK rare diseases strategy. There are now 51 recommendations. It is not just a brochure; it is a serious document with commitments and an action plan. Although the number of rare disease patients suffering from a particular condition may be small—the one that we are considering affects about 150 patients a year—collectively more than 3 million people in the UK suffer from rare diseases, so they are not rare; they are very common, and they are experienced by a huge number of people. It is only fair that the system should recognise that, and start to adjust and adapt towards the mainstreaming of provision for people with rare diseases.

Research is, of course, vital, which is why the £1 billion a year that we spend on the National Institute for Health Research, the £850 million for the Medical Research Council and the £1.4 billion spent by the Association of Medical Research Charities and its members is so important. That underpins UK leadership in this space, and it is even more important for rare conditions such as Stevens-Johnson syndrome. There are some encouraging research projects under way which I want to highlight, partly because I think they give hope to patients and charities.

The National Institute for Health Research clinical research network is supporting the MOLGEN trial. It is actively recruiting patients from across 80 NHS trusts who have experienced adverse drug reactions. That study has already recruited 1,740 participants and plans to continue recruiting patients until February 2019 with an eventual aim of accurately predicting those patients at risk of developing severe reactions, including Stevens-Johnson syndrome.

Further research that is likely to benefit those with the syndrome include the 10-year study of chronic eye inflammation, including SJS, which is being taken forward by the NIHR clinical research network in the west midlands. That has recruited 224 patients to date and will continue until 2021. The MRC Centre for Drug Safety Science at the University of Liverpool is doing powerful work in this field and has already been instrumental in identifying some of the genetic markers that indicate that a patient group are at an increased risk of developing the condition. The progress we are making in genetics generally, in terms of deep science, identification and genetics for new cures, holds real hope. Being realistic, that is not hope for those patients who are in that excruciating agony that the right hon. Lady described in the words of one of her constituents. Being realistic, that is not hope for those patients who are in that excruciating agony that the right hon. Lady powerfully described in the words of one of her constituents.

While patients with SJS are more likely to be identified earlier and receive the best forms of clinical management, we want to prevent the condition in the first place by understanding the underlying genetic causes. That is why, as Stevens-Johnson syndrome, there is an opportunity for us to use the genomic programme to trigger greater awareness among those who suffer from rare diseases, and possibly to drive up recruitment rates for the programme.

Although we are only partially through sequencing the first genomes, we are already identifying extraordinary insights into rare diseases. I saw recently, while meeting the informatics team at Genomics England, a man who had experienced adverse drug reactions. That information alone were they able to recognise that that pathway is one that is implicated in the disease, for which there is already a treatment that is available at pence as a generic. With the patient’s consent they decided to try it and the drug arrested the condition.

That is an extraordinary breakthrough that was based on genomics simply allowing us to understand, initially quite randomly, how to prevent that condition, though we have not got a cure for it. We have identified in the haystack of the pharmacopeia of drugs one that has already worked. The genome programme is already identifying early treatments that are giving patients with rare diseases real hope. I am delighted to say that while the programme is a bit behind on the recruitment and sequencing of cancer genomes, for a whole series of operational reasons, it is steaming ahead on rare diseases. The UK is driving world leadership in that space. I was recently in Washington and met the White House precision medicine team, which is looking to us for a steer on how to use genomics to drive rare disease treatment and diagnosis.

Dame Margaret Hodge: To be specific about SJS, are there volunteers who have the condition, or relatives of volunteers who have it, in that sample? I do not know what is appropriate; I am not a great scientist, but that would seem to me to be a very useful way of progressing on this particular rare disease, though I recognise it is one of many. Does the Minister know?

George Freeman: The right hon. Lady read my mind. I do not have that information at my fingertips but I have already asked that question and I will happily ask Genomics England to ensure that she and I have that answer. I will touch on the point she made about awareness because there is an opportunity for us to use the genomic programme to trigger greater awareness among those who suffer from rare diseases, and possibly to drive up recruitment rates for the programme.
Let me touch on the NHS rare diseases advisory group, which recently noted that SJS is a devastating disease with a very high mortality rate, and endorsed the proposal for a highly specialised service for SJS and toxic epidermal necrolysis. The intention is for a nationally commissioned service to standardise treatment around the country in a small number of expert centres. Those proposals include a network of centres for both treatment and research and for using the diagnostic material to support that research. The establishment of a national service should make it possible to implement the national guidelines for patient care that were published by the British Association of Dermatologists just last month.

The Government absolutely recognise the long-term impact of SJS on survivors and their families. That is why we are putting not just research but patient support and a patient voice at the heart of the UK strategy for rare diseases. It is crucial that people who suffer from conditions like these are able to both feel that their suffering is not in vein and that they are being listened to and supporting research, and also that they are helping to drive new care pathways.

I will address the specific questions the right hon. Lady asked. She talked about lack of awareness and training. She is absolutely right that that is a major issue for our health system because the more we discover those rare diseases, the more we have a real challenge to keep our medical students up to date. In the old days we trained medics for the conditions that we understood then but, because of the pace of discovery now, we have discovered new diseases that were not known when their textbooks were published before they have even finished a year at medical school. That is a challenge for the whole system and I will raise that important point with the relevant agencies who are in charge of training to ensure that they are address it.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I take that point but I draw to the Minister’s attention the fact that this disease was identified in 1922; it is not entirely new. Early identification means the drug that is causing the problem is withdrawn. The right hon. Lady made an excellent point about awareness that is taking that seriously and I will follow up—or will I?—on her point about awareness. There may be different ways to do that but her idea is first class. She also talked about how research, she would not be doing her job if she did not. The Government spend a considerable amount of money on research. The NIHR has a policy of not identifying particular diseases and earmarking money to them but, following the debate, I will raise with the NIHR how much is being spent that would be relevant for sufferers of SJS. I know it is taking steps to amend its research criteria in the years ahead so that it is responding to the progress made in the genomics programme and others.

The right hon. Lady raised the idea of an awareness week, which I think is an excellent idea. The truth is there are many rare diseases and I foresee a clamour for every rare disease to have a week, for which there would not be enough weeks in the year. It may be that one has a rare dermatological conditions awareness week, which would heighten awareness. There may be different ways to do that but her idea is first class. She also talked about how research, she would not be doing her job if she did not. The Government spend a considerable amount of money on research. The NIHR has a policy of not identifying particular diseases and earmarking money to them but, following the debate, I will raise with the NIHR how much is being spent that would be relevant for sufferers of SJS. I know it is taking steps to amend its research criteria in the years ahead so that it is responding to the progress made in the genomics programme and others.

Lastly, the right hon. Lady raised the important issue of side effects and the wider science of drug side effects, which the Government are investing in through a whole series of programmes in the Department of Health and NHS England. Understanding side effects can be a cue to the science of new cures. I hope she is reassured that we are taking that seriously and I will follow up—or will ensure my successor follows up, if I am no longer in post after today—the points she has sensibly raised.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
Govia Thameslink Rail Service

[Joan Ryan in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con):

I beg to move,

That this House has considered the performance of Govia Thameslink rail service.

I had wanted to title the debate “The Woeful Performance of the GTR Service”, but the Table Office would not allow me to do so. Here we are—déjà vu all over again. It is no surprise to see on both sides of the Chamber so many hon. Members from south London and Sussex who have a close interest in this appalling state of affairs, which is continuing to deteriorate.

Southern Thameslink goes from bad to worse. It cancels more trains than the whole of the rest of the network put together. Our constituents are losing their jobs, parents are unable to see their children because they get home so late at night and students are missing lessons at schools and colleges, and in some cases missing exams, as a result of the woeful incompetence of this train company, and there is no end in sight. This is embarrassing, pathetic, unsustainable and a national disgrace for Britain’s largest rail passenger carrier. The management, the unions and, frankly, the Department for Transport should all be thoroughly ashamed that we are in this state of affairs. I would guess that it is the single biggest issue at the moment for most colleagues in the Chamber—it will be even bigger than the issue of Brexit that we have been hearing so much about here today, and there is no end in sight.

I have with me many emails. One says:

“Yesterday I saw one unfortunate gentleman who became very poorly and distressed after having stood, squashed, for over an hour and a half in full city attire, an older American woman in tears and several hugely upset elderly people and little children who became panicked about the heat and crush.”

There are other people who do not get home until after 9.30 at night, having left the City at 5 o’clock. Someone missed his wedding anniversary. He ended his email to Southern by saying that “frankly guys it’s not good enough.

Please, give up the franchise.

Please, don’t spend £6m on taxis for execs—please spend it on me.

Please, don’t keep blaming staff shortages—they are equally blaming you and it’s me (and my fellow commuters) sitting in the middle.

Please, remember—until you give up/lose the franchise—you are a TRANSPORT company. So please—transport people!”

It goes on and on. Another email says:

“At the end of the day it would seem to me that Southern and the RMT”—the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers—“are acting like two spoiled children. Both have their positions and both are refusing to move at all, neither gives a damn about customers. It is the customer that is suffering in all this—it would not be so bad if we had any choice about the train operator that we use (in which case Southern trains would be empty I’m sure)—the fact is Southern have a monopoly and we have no other options.”

Time and again, we are getting emails like that, with no sign of the situation getting any better at all.

Jim Dowd (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, although the current dispute has made matters markedly worse, in truth the reason why Southern should relinquish the franchise is that its performance has been lamentable over many years, not just recently?

Tim Loughton: Well, the franchise has not been going for that many years and of course we had all the problems supposedly attributable to London Bridge at the beginning of the year, when the situation was bad enough, but it has got hugely worse since then. I will come on to that in a moment—I know that many other hon. Members want to speak.

On Monday, to deal with the crisis, GTR introduced its emergency timetable. That came on the back of the increasing number of planned cancellations, presumably because it reduces the penalties that the company has to pay. It came on top of the loosening of the franchise agreement, which I read about in the newspaper. Hon. Members were given no notice by the Department for Transport or, indeed, the company itself. Given all the interest that had been shown by colleagues here today, one would at least have expected to have been forewarned about that by the Minister. That was, frankly, discourteous and disgraceful and has only compounded our anger with the way the whole dispute has been handled.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman may find this experience familiar. My constituent Lucy Cooper emailed me on behalf of her daughter, Ellie, who is a Govia Thameslink Railway customer—I use that word advisedly. Ellie described being so packed on a train that the person next to her fainted. The woman was fortunately not hurt, because there were so many people crowded around her that she could not even fall down. Is that not shocking in terms of the level of unsafe practices that are now arising?

Tim Loughton: I completely agree. I am sure all of us in the Chamber have similar stories and have had similar emails and letters. Gatwick airport is the gateway to the United Kingdom. Some 40 million people come to Gatwick airport currently, let alone if a second runway is positioned there. What an impression they get of the infrastructure in this country when they have to get on a train in those conditions!

On Monday, to deal with the crisis, GTR introduced its emergency timetable. That came on the back of the increasing number of planned cancellations, presumably because it reduces the penalties that the company has to pay. It came on top of the loosening of the franchise agreement, which I read about in the newspaper. Hon. Members were given no notice by the Department for Transport or, indeed, the company itself. Given all the interest that had been shown by colleagues here today, one would at least have expected to have been forewarned about that by the Minister. That was, frankly, discourteous and disgraceful and has only compounded our anger with the way the whole dispute has been handled.
When the new emergency timetable came in, what was the result? Last night, I got the figures for the public performance measure for 12 July. With the emergency timetable and 341 planned cancellations—341 fewer trains running—the PPM was 77%; it was barely three quarters on the second day of the emergency timetable.

The position was that 2,800 trains ran, 2,172 were more or less on time, 620 were late and 122 were cancelled or very late. The result of the emergency timetable is that there is less choice for customers and more overcrowding, but presumably fewer fines. Extraordinarily, Charles Horton, the chief executive, in his appearance before the Select Committee on Transport the other day, said:

“We expect to see crowding levels evening out because of more regular intervals between trains”
as a result of the emergency timetable.

What sort of weird logic is that? There will be the same number of passengers battling to get a train to or from work, but more inconvenience because of the timings and surely more overcrowding because there are fewer trains to convey them. The extraordinary complacency of that attitude is absolutely baffling.

Specific problems have been caused by the change in the timetable. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) will mention the suspension of the Lewes to Seaford line in other than peak times—there is a replacement bus service—which includes the cross-channel port of Newhaven, which does not now have a regular daytime train service. It includes one of my local schools. We actually had the platform extended because, with the number of girls from Davison High School in Worthing using that station to go to and from school, it had become dangerous. Now, the only train in the morning arrives at East Worthing station at 5.35 or 7.16, with no further trains getting there until 18:24, and there is a similar lack of trains going home. Therefore, a station that Southern Rail expanded to cater for the increasing number of pupils using it cannot be used as a stop for those girls to go to and from school. The crisis that this is causing is absolutely crazy.

The company cancelled 341 trains as part of the emergency timetable. We are told in the briefing note from GTR:

“The number of trains cancelled in the revised timetable is 341 which is broadly similar to the number”

that were cancelled on an ad hoc basis to date.

That is fine: the company is just making it official that it is rubbish—that now it is part of the official timetable that it is officially very rubbish. It is extraordinary logic, and apparently the company has done that without even having to get the permission of the Department for Transport, or so the chief executive claimed at the Select Committee the other day. We would like to know from the Minister how this works. It is the only company, or so the chief executive claimed, that has driver-only operated trains, despite the fact those already operate on 60% of GTR’s Thameslink services and 30% of trains on the whole of the network, and have done since 1985. It is not prepared to sit down and discuss that, and it is not prepared to acknowledge independent studies that have shown that there is not a major safety consideration.

Then we had the management of GTR saying, “We have tried to sit down with them but they are being unreasonable and they are all going off sick deliberately.” There may be some truth in that; they may be cancelling trains deliberately in order to worsen the situation. Frankly, my constituents do not care whose fault it is; they just wanted it sorted. There is, “He said this”, “She said that”, “He did this”, “They did that”—it is absolutely ridiculous. Somebody—frankly, it should be the Government—should get the two parties together and metaphorically if not physically bang some heads together and tell them to sort it or else.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the way that he is dealing with this debate. It is clear from the statistics, which he will have seen, that the company is suffering from a very high level of real sickness. Clearly, there is something very wrong, but especially it has a very sick workforce. Does he agree that there are ways that sophisticated companies manage things like sickness? Would it not be better if the management of GTR took a great deal more trouble and were more proactive in dealing with the sickness problem?

Tim Loughton: My right hon. Friend is right. As somebody who has been even angrier than me in the face of GTR on occasions, he knows that there are solutions to this problem that have not been properly pursued. We are told by GTR that before the dispute happened approximately 21 conductors were off sick at any one time. Overnight, when this dispute came in, that almost doubled to 40, with spikes at three particular depots. Something is clearly up but there are things that GTR could do, whether genuine sickness needs sorting out or it is a form of unofficial working to rule.

I have been trying to get to the bottom of the finances in this whole crisis. In the Select Committee last week, Charles Horton said that GTR’s turnover amounts to some £1.3 billion, with just over 90% of that coming from the fare, paid by the Department for Transport, for running the franchise. The amount of fine—it is really difficult to drill down into exactly how much fine it has paid—seems to be about £2 million. Less than 0.2% of its annual revenue is having to be paid in fines as a result of the incompetent way in which it has run this service. Is that a real disincentive or penalty? I just cannot see how it is.

This is an unconventional franchise. I have tried looking at the franchise: all 668 pages of it. It is the only one in the country where the rail company is paid a fee by the Department and where all the revenue from passengers’ tickets goes directly to the Government. It is difficult to see who loses out when it goes wrong. When the network fails, there is a points problem, a London Bridge problem or whatever, Network Rail pays a penalty.

urgent. All this time, it is the passengers—our constituents—who are suffering and losing out. We listened to Mick Cash from the RMT in front of the Select Committee on 14 July. Were he wise to be so angry? Frankly, my constituents do not care whose fault it is; they just wanted it sorted. There is, “He said this”, “She said that”, “He did this”, “They did that”—it is absolutely ridiculous. Somebody—frankly, it should be the Government—should get the two parties together and metaphorically if not physically bang some heads together and tell them to sort it or else.
to GTR as the operator. That penalty is only paid on to the customer if they actually get round to the complicated process of the compensation payments, so GTR makes a profit, potentially, from problems on the network.

We read in The Times a few months ago—as I said, we were not notified by the Department—that GTR had been in breach of its licence and could have lost its franchise, but instead the Department agreed simply to loosen the targets for GTR, allowing an additional 9,000 trains to be cancelled a year without it being in breach of the reconfigured franchise agreement. These are my questions to the Minister. Exactly how much is GTR losing and what is the financial impact on Government revenue? How much compensation is Network Rail paying to GTR that is not then paid out to customers? What is the impact of the planned cancellations on penalties payable? My understanding is that there are planned cancellations it does not have to pay the ad hoc penalties when trains do not turn up, do not start or skip stations or whatever. Are there financial implications for the loosening of the franchise and the introduction of this emergency timetable? What does this boil down to is how much GTR and the Government have to feel financially pained before they do something urgently to resolve this crisis—and this is a crisis of great magnitude.

The Minister has the power to intervene on behalf of passengers and has made various statements. In yesterday’s Evening Standard she was quoted as saying that

“the real solution is for the RMT to end this dispute and the high levels of sickness amongst its members…we are working with TFL and issued a prospectus earlier in the year for new ways to improve services in the capital.”

That comes after the Mayor asked for GTR to be stripped of its franchise. The Minister has also said:

“Historically the Government doesn’t intervene in industrial disputes.”

But we are now told that a letter has been sent by the Minister to the unions offering some sort of deal. Perhaps she will comment on that and whether it is true, whether she is going to intervene, whether she can intervene and whether she is prepared to intervene. She has said:

“The union is holding commuters to ransom. Again if there was a legitimate safety concern or genuine job losses I would understand but this is a growing industry…This is not about job losses. This is about politics…What do you want me to do, get them in for beer and sandwiches?”

Frankly, that is not good enough and those sorts of sloganising headlines do nothing to get this problem resolved for our constituents. She has really got to get a grip.

There are many other problems as well. Back in January we had a summit in Westminster Hall. It was a very useful meeting. My right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) was greatly aerated. We enjoyed his interventions at the expense of the GTR management greatly; they were heartfelt and passionate and we all agreed with him. At that summit we had GTR, Network Rail, Department for Transport officials, MPs, Transport Focus and others—there were about 22 or so hon. Members, many of whom are in this room at the moment. We made it clear at that stage that this could not go on. At that stage we were primarily looking at the fallout from the problems with London Bridge, well before these additional problems came along. We were promised a follow-up summit six months on in order to assess the situation. Where has that gone? We have one week to go before the recess and there is no follow-up summit to get everybody together and hold their feet to the fire—in my right hon. Friend’s favourite phrase.

What really struck everybody at that summit was that the head official from the Department for Transport, when asked about taking back the franchise, got up and said, “Well basically, if GTR were not running this franchise—a very large franchise, a complex franchise—I would be the one responsible for it in the Department for Transport, and you don’t want that.” In effect, GTR was told it faced little prospect of us taking back the franchise because we cannot really run it ourselves. What sort of incentive was that for GTR to get its act together if it knows it can get even worse and even then the Government will not intervene and do something about it? I am really angry about this on behalf of my constituents.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate and I absolutely 100% agree with him on behalf of my constituents that use East Dulwich, Peckham, Rye and Queens Road. They will identify completely with the level of total exasperation and frustration. He has diligently gone through all this and has done all the right things, but his constituents’ situations are simply getting worse and are set to get worse still, with disruption to family and working life and downright safety issues. I simply lend him my support and say that my constituents are every bit as desperate as his. We have no tube and we have congested roads, so they cannot go by bus. People cannot lead their lives like this. I agree with him that GTR should be stripped of the franchise.

Tim Loughton: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Lady for that short intervention. She echoes the words of so many of our other colleagues who could not be here, including my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who texted me to tell me that he was stuck on a train somewhere, otherwise he would have joined our deliberations.

Many other problems affect this railway; it is not just the unreliability of when the trains actually run. There is overcrowding, safety is an issue and, at the same time, Southern is trying to close down all our ticket offices. It has only given a temporary moratorium on that—what a stupid thing to do. When the company cannot even run the service, it tries to threaten the easiest way of selling tickets for it. We have the antiquated rolling stock on the west coastway line—the class 313 rolling stock is 40 years old, and has no loos or any other basics. Female constituents have real problems when stranded late at night in stations far from home because a station has been skipped or the last train has been cancelled. It is not just inconvenient; there is danger attached as well.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I see that just two of us are here from the northern side of the Thameslink line. Is my hon. Friend aware that yesterday, the 7.34 am Brighton train from St Albans, which was a
brand-new train—one of the class 700 stock—broke down, so this is not just about old rolling stock, but about new rolling stock?

Tim Loughton: I fear that that is right. Again, we were promised that everything would be so much better because of the investment in rolling stock—that it is all coming in and it is all going to be fine.

Finally, there is the issue of compensation. We are constantly told by GTR, “We have this compensation scheme, which is not easy to administer,” but the amount of compensation that people are getting back for the huge amount of aggro that they face is paltry. Frankly, my constituents are not primarily interested in compensation. They just want a reliable service with a better than evens chance of them being able to turn up at the station and get on a train at about the time they want to catch it, to arrive at their destination within about five minutes or so of the published times, and go about their work or education as normal. That is what they want.

Given the extended, prolonged, intense aggravation there has been, season-ticket holders in particular should get serious discounts. When they renew their season tickets, whether or not they have put in for individual compensation, they should get a serious discount and a very large apology to go with it.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): On compensation, I had an email from a constituent who is losing earnings day in, day out. They noted: “I was unable to travel…due to no trains running between Polegate and Haywards Heath. I was compensated £19 for my daily loss of earnings of £350.”

My hon. Friend also mentioned the situation being dangerous, and I point out that this is not only about people’s jobs being on the line. A constituent of mine said to me that they are so late picking up their child from nursery that they are worried because:

“It is standard procedure that most nurseries contact social services when parents are late.”

The situation is damaging people’s lives.

Tim Loughton: That is just another example of the extraordinary strength of the impact on our constituents.

In summing up, I really think, with the greatest respect—and I understand that the situation is complex and challenging—that enough is enough. The Minister has got to get a grip on this. If this has not been sorted by the beginning of September, after the impact of the emergency timetable—and we have had no clear indication of when it will be sorted—GTR should lose its franchise by the end of the year. There have been enough warnings and pathetic excuses about one thing or another going wrong—goodness knows what it will be by the time we get to September—and this has gone on for far too long.

I hope that in response to this debate, the Minister can give a clear indication of what it will take for the company to lose its franchise, if it does not get its act together. At the very least, our constituents deserve a proper and honest answer from her about how she will achieve this and when. We are fed up on behalf of our constituents, who have to take this flack day in, day out. It is not fair, it is not right, and she needs to do something about it—and tell us what—now.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I will put a five-minute limit on all speakers now. I may have to reduce that to try to ensure that everybody gets the opportunity to speak.

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) not only on securing the debate, but on a very powerful speech; I agree with almost every single word. The fact that we see hon. Members from both sides of the House talking on a cross-party basis, along the same lines, illustrates the strength of feeling among our constituents about the joke of a service that they have been getting from GTR on Southern and Thameslink lines. I also take this opportunity to thank the 10 hon. Members—I think most are here—who have signed my early-day motion 298 calling for GTR to be stripped of the franchise.

I have to say that I laughed yesterday, when at about 5 o’clock, GTR tweeted:

“Don’t forget to plan your journey home this evening as there may have been a change to your usual train”.

There is nothing usual about the services that GTR provides. It has the worst record on cancellation and significant lateness, by some margin, of any operator, and it performs worst on the public performance measure.

As the hon. Gentleman said, we have had meeting after meeting and several debates on this issue. We get excuse after excuse, and our constituents have all reached the end of the line in their patience with what is going on. [Laughter.] See what I did there? The bottom line is that the company has not trained enough drivers. It is true that Network Rail has contributed to the situation and that GTR has to operate on an ageing infrastructure, but frankly, so do all the other train-operating companies. The delay figures show that Network Rail has caused more delays for the other train operators than for GTR, but the other train operators outperform GTR. There has been poor planning on a gargantuan scale and frankly, the management of GTR are absolutely appalling. We still have problems with basic things like information being provided when there is lateness.

The impact on constituents is absolutely unbearable. People have lost their jobs, which is a disgrace, as a result of the company’s poor performance. People who are still in their jobs arrive at work stressed and do not have the right mindset to start work, which will of course have an impact on productivity. Students and pupils have told me about the impact of the stress of getting to school to do their exams recently, as a result of the performance of that train operator.

So what do we want? I will probably not take up my whole five minutes, because I want to ensure that everyone else can get in. This franchise needs to end, and it needs to end now, or as soon as possible. I do not see why we should have to wait until 2020 or 2021 when it is up for renewal. I just cannot understand—I say this as somebody who professionally, as a lawyer, worked on a franchise agreement—how the company is not in breach of this franchise, such that it can be taken away from it. I understand absolutely that this is a big franchise. It is probably too big and, ultimately, I would like to see the
parts of this franchise that cover London suburban routes transferred to Transport for London, which I believe could do a much better job of providing services to my constituents.

Turning to the longer term, in Streatham, we have Streatham Hill, Streatham and Streatham Common stations, as well as Tulse Hill and Balham stations just outside, and our stations have been over capacity for some time. Our population is growing and we are not in any Government programme to upgrade our local transport to be fit for the future. That is why ultimately, what we would like to see—I think this may provide a long-term solution to our problems with GTR and this particular franchise—is Crossrail 2 routed through Streatham. That would alleviate congestion on the Northern and Victoria lines, which are nearby, because large numbers of people to the east and south of those lines would therefore not have to travel to Tooting Bec, Tooting Broadway, Balham and Brixton and could use a Streatham Crossrail station. It would relieve congestion at Streatham Common, which is the sixth busiest station in the Southern network, and at Streatham station. It would cut congestion on our roads, too. Also, Streatham Action, a local group, and our local council have been clear that it would also provide an opportunity for growth and regeneration in our area.

I want to come back to where the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham finished. What we want from the Minister today is action. We do not want the warm words that say, “Yes, I agree with you about how awful they have been.” We want action, and we certainly do not want the Minister acting as an apologist for this company.

3 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): We have been here before. There have been at least two debates in this Chamber, one secured by me and one by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), in which we heavily criticised Southern and also Network Rail for failing to deliver a satisfactory performance for their customers. We welcomed the introduction of a performance improvement plan, then a year later got very annoyed that the self-set targets, already low in that performance improvement plan, had not been adhered to; and before Christmas I said that unless there was a significant and rapid improvement in the performance of the company, removal of the franchise should certainly be considered.

Let us be clear. The current performance, which is measurably worse than it was a year ago and has deteriorated rapidly, is due to new and different reasons, and we have to understand what they are. Before the strikes that were called by the rail unions, 26 train cancellations a day were due to train crew unavailability. Clearly, it is a major failure on the part of GTR Southern not to have recruited sufficient staff to be able to run the service. Nobody should resist from criticising the company for that.

After the strikes began, in the period 29 March to 25 June, 148 trains were cancelled a day—a remarkable increase. The figures produced by GTR tell us, assuming that they are reliable, that driver sickness since the start of the strikes has increased by about a third and the willingness to work overtime has reduced by about a third. It is that remarkable loss of labour that is causing the real disruption that so annoys our constituents at the moment.

The dispute turns on whether it is safe to introduce trains with driver-operated doors. The question for hon. Members of all parties, including all of us who rail about the performance of the franchise holder, is whether it is safe to introduce such trains. Do we think the unions have a case in mounting their industrial action or not? It is hard to argue that there is a safety issue when 60% of the trains currently operated by GTR already have driver-only operation of doors. 40% of them Southern trains. Are we all saying that those trains are unsafe? Are the unions saying that those trains are unsafe? That is the kernel of the issue at the moment, so let us confront it.

We have to decide whether the unions have a point. If we do not think they have a point—I do not think they do, because there will be no job losses, no reductions in pay, and there will still be staff on almost all the trains, including the drivers that currently have guards who operate the doors—why are we blaming Southern entirely for this dispute?

I have absolutely no compunction about criticising Southern. No hon. Member has criticised Southern more firmly than I have over the past year. I have been very clear about the failings of the company and its management. No hon. Member has criticised Southern more firmly—the record shows that—but I am sure that the current disruption is being caused by the industrial action. What I question is why we collectively—hon. Members of all parties—have been so reticent to attribute proper blame to the unions for what is happening. In my judgment, the unions are being very clever. They know that this dispute is effectively a work to rule.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and congratulate all those who have taken part in the debate. Does the right hon. Gentleman think it helped or hindered when Peter Wilkinson, the managing director of passenger services, said earlier this year:

“We have got to break them...They can’t afford to spend too long on strike and I will push them into that place...They will have to decide if they want to give a good service or get the hell out of my industry”?

I agree about the need for good industrial relations, but does the right hon. Gentleman think that that was constructive?

Nick Herbert: I am not defending Southern’s industrial relations. The question for the hon. Lady is whether she thinks the dispute is justified. If she would like to tell me that, I will sit down and give way to her now. Is the dispute justified or not?

Lilian Greenwood: Clearly, there has been a breakdown in communication between staff and management.

Nick Herbert: Answer the question.

Lilian Greenwood: The only way in which a dispute will be resolved is by people sitting round the table to discuss concerns about safety, and there are concerns across the network, across the country, about safety issues on platforms and about the control of doors.
Nick Herbert: We did not get an answer to the question, and therein lies the problem: the current disruption that is causing massive inconvenience to our constituents is principally—caused by the industrial action, which is official on strike days but unofficial when it clearly amounts to a work to rule. The problem is being caused by the unions, but hon. Members are not willing to criticise the unions for that. Undoubtedly, all sections of the rail industry have a case to answer for the poor performance in the franchise. Some 60% of the delays up until we had the strike were caused by the failures of infrastructure of Network Rail, not Southern, although that is partly being caused by the upgrade at London Bridge.

There is a real question about whether the franchise should have been awarded and about the scale of it. The franchise is too big. All parties have a case to answer; I am sure there is a case to answer on the part of GTR and Southern’s management, too. For a start, they kicked off with insufficient drivers and staff. That is poor planning, but I go back to the central point that I was seeking to make: I have found it surprising in this debate that so little attention has focused on what the unions are doing.

Before the hon. Lady intervened, I was making the point that the unions have been very clever, because all the blame has been attributed to Southern, and what happens? We now have a pantomime villain to whom it is very easy for us all to say, “Boo! Take the franchise away.” I joined in on this pantomime cry: “Take the franchise away and all the problems will be over.” That is the easy thing for us all to say, but the question will remain: is it safe to have these new trains with driver-only operation of doors? The new franchisee will have to answer that question, and hon. Members are doing themselves no service at all by failing to address the key reason why the dispute arose in the first place.

3.8 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the very first time, Ms Ryan, and I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for securing this debate. He and I sometimes sit together on the train—we come from neighbouring constituencies—so we suffer alongside the people we serve and see the problems at first hand.

I want to do the unusual thing of thanking the Minister because in the short time that I have been an MP, she has never refused to meet me to discuss the issue. It has often turned into weekly discussions where the anger that has been expressed to me by the people I represent has been expressed in forceful terms to her, which she has always accepted at face value, and I am grateful for that.

In the year and a half that I have been a Member of Parliament, it has been made clear that representing a constituency served by Southern is like having toothache: you wake up in the morning and feel the pain of people who are trying, and failing, to get to work on time; you feel the pain of people who get home late in the evening. It is constant and absolutely unavoidable.

I never expected, when I became an MP, that I would become such an expert on the train system serving my constituency. I now know the timetable, even though it changes so readily. I know the rolling stock. I have spent time training and doing work shadowing on the line, including shadowing several drivers to enable me to understand the pressures they face. I have visited London Bridge to see the construction site, and have made a visit to see the new rolling stock, to try to understand the pressures on the system. I understand the scale of the problem. There is historical underfunding; new rolling stock is coming on line; there is the London Bridge upgrade, as well as routine track maintenance; there is an industrial dispute; and very bad planning by the rail franchisee has led to the poor number of drivers and conductors that underpins all the problems.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that part of the problem—apart from what was highlighted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert)—is that the franchisee never planned ahead sufficiently for the right number of drivers and continued to give us thoroughly wrong information about how quickly the increase in driver numbers would improve the service?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman’s intervention, because that is an incredibly important point. As I have said, bad management planning has underpinned all that is happening. It takes 18 months to train a new driver, and the driver shortages of the past six months to a year were absolutely predictable. GTR should have been on the case far earlier, and the fact that there is such a shortage of expertise on the line, including the shortage of drivers and conductors, has underpinned a shambles and turned it into a crisis. I have absolute sympathy with the right hon. Gentleman’s intervention.

It is inexplicable to me that, even with all the challenges on the line, things have so quickly descended into crisis. At the moment, in the midst of an industrial dispute, there is what I can only describe as a dysfunctional relationship at the heart of the network—between Government and the franchise holder, and the franchise holder and the unions, with Railtrack involved as well. That is the heart of the problem.

The Minister will know that not only do I come to her to whinge, like everyone else, but I also try to present solutions. Many hon. Members here are like me, and want to help to turn things around and be supportive. I hosted a public meeting last week. The chief operating officer for Govia kindly came down and faced the full
force of the anger in my constituency, so I am very grateful to Dyan Crowther. She left the meeting having learned in no uncertain terms how strong the sentiment is at this time. I have also co-founded and co-chair, with the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), an all-party group that will provide an opportunity for all MPs in the area to come together for scrutiny of the issue, and enable them to support the change that is needed. I hope my actions will prove constructive.

Campaigers handed me a petition on the way in, and there are some sensible questions that I want to put directly to the Minister on their behalf. They want a sustainable compensation scheme that will be much more aggressive, assertive and responsive than the present one. They want first class to be declassified permanently, while the temporary timetable is in operation. I have written to the Minister about that; it is eminently sensible. The campaigers want the Minister to announce the duration of the present temporary timetable. I hope she will take all those points into consideration and give direct answers to the campaigers who want action so much.

3.15 pm

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I was going to start my remarks with a comment about déjà vu until I remembered that I started my previous remarks in this Chamber, on the same subject, with a comment about déjà vu. We are getting continuous repetition.

I held a public meeting on this subject in Horsham on Saturday, and 300 of my constituents turned up—all very angry. At least one of them, I dare say, is still angry, having come up by train to sit in the Public Gallery today. I will not repeat the remarks that other Members have so eloquently made about all the problems the situation is causing—the way jobs, health and family life are being put at risk. That has been expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), among others. Every Member of Parliament attending the debate knows about that, the unions know about it, and the management knows about it.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), who is also my constituency neighbour, I have been forthright in attacking GTR for poor performance, including in a debate that I obtained in this place three months ago. I am afraid that GTR entered the dispute when its reputation among its customers was at a low ebb. Notwithstanding that, I have no doubt that, as my right hon. Friend said, the immediate cause of the problems on the trains in recent months has been the dispute between the conductors and GTR.

I welcome the £2.5 billion investment in new trains. The independent Rail Safety and Standards Board has confirmed that the train doors can be operated safely by the driver. If that is so, it should be implemented. It does not mean that trains should be denuded of a second professional. I am totally in favour of having a second member of staff, trained in all safety precautions and techniques, on board the train in all but exceptional circumstances. I endorse the comment of the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna), who pointed out that management should have a sufficiency of trained personnel to ensure that trains can run appropriately. However, on those occasions, which should be rare, when a second staff member is not available, I want the train to be able to run, if it can do so safely, and get my constituants home in the evening from London Bridge or Victoria. I know that my constituents who are undergoing the current nightmare would appreciate knowing how many trains have been cancelled in the past because a conductor was not available.

Echoing what other hon. Members have said, I ask the Government to intervene directly to ensure that the dispute will be resolved. I have heard the Minister’s comments on guaranteeing jobs beyond the current franchise. My constituents are incredulous at the fact that no agreement has been possible to date, and I hope that the Minister’s proposal may result in a breakthrough in discussions. The dispute must not be allowed to continue. While the temporary timetable persists, may I ask the Minister four things? I make no apology for reiterating some of the remarks of the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle).

First, why are trains not being declassified to ease the congestion on the reduced number of services? I appreciate that that may imply compensating first-class ticket holders; well, we should do so. Secondly, when will there be a complete overhaul of compensation? The Prime Minister—he remains it currently—promised a couple of weeks ago that we would hear news on that, but we still have not. It was in response to a question of mine in the main Chamber, at column 294 on 29 June. Let us be clear: delay repay does not do it. Many season ticket holders have given up on the trains because of their lack of reliability. They bought their season ticket for use with a timetable that has proved to be fictitious. I want a significant refund to be made to passengers.

Thirdly, GTR has shown a lack of foresight in the planning around the dispute. The dumping ground that is Three Bridges station is renowned. Why could alternative means to get passengers home from there reliably, without the colossal expense of taxis, not have been put in place by now? Lastly, in addition to explaining to customers the rationale for the dispute, I hope the management will give a granular explanation of the cause of the continuing disruption. Can we have, for example, regular publication of sickness statistics? GTR owes its customers, whose trust in the operator is low, proper explanations of why their lives are being made so miserable.

I appreciate that the franchise is huge and there were good reasons, connected with going through London, why it was put together in its present form. In our previous debate I asked the Minister to be brave, if she felt that she needed to and if the franchise had become too large and out of control. I should love to hear her comments on how she feels the debate has gone, and whether the franchise is still operable on its current basis.

Several hon. Members rose—

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. In an effort to ensure that everybody has the opportunity to speak, I am reducing the time limit to three minutes.
Jim Dowd (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I will try not to use even those three minutes, Ms Ryan. I want to echo what others have said and to congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) not just on securing the debate, but on the passion and comprehensive nature of his arguments, reflecting the concerns of his constituents and everybody in this room.

The right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) made some points about the safety of trains without conductors. In the inner London part of the franchise, which GTR laughingly calls the metro zone, there are no conductors. If I thought for one moment that running driver-only trains was dangerous, I would be kicking up a fuss on behalf of my constituents who are expected to use trains without conductors. I do not believe that that issue is the key to the problem.

The difficulty is that Southern has provided lamentable services consistently throughout the time it has had the franchise. It worries me that the same company has the Southeastern franchise. The company will say that there is a Chinese wall between the franchises but I fear the contagion may spread. Just yesterday, one of my constituents said:

"On the new 'emergency timetable', peak time services, including the 802 from Anerley, have been cancelled meaning that passengers are forced to travel in overcrowded conditions on services that are often short formed and subject to delays and last minute cancellations. There is nothing particularly new here. Southern has always provided a sub-par service. This most recent disaster, however, seems to be a lot worse than the usual chaos."

People have had to get used to “the usual chaos” when the service is provided by Southern.

I was standing on Forest Hill station the other day, fortunately waiting for an Overground service to Canada Water to come here. While I was there, the first train listed was the Southern service into London Bridge. As I stood there, it went from “on time”, to “delayed”, to “cancelled” within the space of four minutes. The short-running of trains is compounding the problem. People get on trains such as those on the Victoria to London Bridge line, which is supposed to go all the way, but they often get to Crystal Palace and are told that the train is terminating there, going both ways—to Victoria or to London Bridge.

The other day, a constituent told me that he had spent £700 on a season ticket for the service between Beckenham Junction and Victoria. That service has now been completely cancelled. I have been on to GTR to try to find out what the compensation arrangements are but, as the service no longer exists, my constituent believes that he now has little or no chance of being able to sustain his current job.

The situation is damaging lives. The sheer unpredictability of it all, from day to day, adds to people’s stress and the difficulties that they face. I know that the Minister has tried valiantly, over a long time, to deal with the situation, but if Southern is not up to running the service, somebody else has to.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): It is not just the new timetable that is the issue. My constituents have faced delays for many weeks and months. Last month, more than 1,350 trains were delayed each and every week. My constituents are fed up. I will not go over the impact it is having on many of them, but their experiences reflect much of what has been said.

My constituency is rural, so the train service is the only form of public transport available to many people. I share Wivelsfield station with my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames). Plumpton, Cooksbridge, Glynde, Berwick and Polegate are also in my area, and are all facing significant delays. Cooksbridge has only ever had peak-time services. One of my campaigns during the election was to get an off-peak and weekend service for Cooksbridge, but I was told by Southern that it could not do that because it would add two minutes to the timetable.

My main concern for my residents is the new timetable, which was introduced on Monday with less than a week’s notice. Services on the branch line have been cut by 80%, and are being run by a replacement bus service. Those service cuts affect the stations of Southease, Newhaven Town, Newhaven Harbour, Bishopstone and Seaford.

Seaford is the largest town in my constituency, with 27,000 people who can no longer get to work and who have to travel to Brighton or Eastbourne, which they can no longer access by train to get to a hospital. There are young people who want to go to the University of Brighton or the University of Sussex, as there is only a sixth-form in the town, but they cannot access higher or further education because they have no train service. It is a tourist town, which depends on people not just leaving the town for work, but coming into the town to spend money.

Newhaven is a town that we are trying desperately to regenerate. I went over to France to try to save the ferry that goes from Newhaven to Dieppe only a few weeks ago. The French put £20 million a year into that ferry, and I am ashamed to say to them, “There is no longer any train service to Newhaven.”

I have five asks of the Minister. First, each and every train ticket, whether it is a single ticket or a season ticket, needs a fare reduction of 25%. Secondly, we need the urgent reintroduction of the branch line for the reasons I mentioned. Thirdly, we need new management to take over Southern. If we are not going to remove the franchise, let us get people in who can run it. No other rail operator has experienced such a level of delays when introducing driver-only trains.

Fourthly, the trolley service needs to be reintroduced. Passengers cannot be on a train for three hours and not be able to buy a bottle of water or a sandwich. The Two Ronnies made a career of making jokes out of British Rail sandwiches; we can laugh no longer because there is no trolley service available at all on my trains. Fithly, first class needs to be declassified. I have been on a train when an elderly woman had nowhere to sit and was fined by Southern because she used first class. That is disgraceful. In the words of my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), enough is enough.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on securing the debate and on his excellent contribution. I echo and agree with
much of what has been said. My constituents use Southern services into London Bridge and Victoria from stations such as East Dulwich, Peckham Rye and North Dulwich, and they use Thameslink services from Sydenham Hill, Herne Hill and Loughborough Junction. It is fair to say that, before the current crisis, services were already unacceptably poor. The works at London Bridge were entirely mismanaged. Southern produced a timetable that was entirely unsustainable, had no resilience and was understaffed. Satisfaction with GTR services is among the lowest in the country and, within that, the lowest levels of satisfaction are within the metro part of the service and among commuters.

My constituents have shown immense patience and forbearance with their rail services while dealing with entirely unacceptable consequences to their quality of life. The impact on family life includes people being unable to see their children at bedtime, being consistently late picking up their children, being unable to meet caring responsibilities, losing jobs, having to move jobs and just simply dealing with the additional stress within lives that are already busy and stretched. That is simply unacceptable.

Much has been said about the industrial dispute. The responsibility for good industrial relations rests with all parties. The seeds of the dispute go back a long way, and are about understaffing. GTR started the franchise with fewer drivers than the previous franchisee reported having in post. How was that even allowed to happen? GTR has been too slow to recruit and too slow to train.

On top of all that is the introduction of the emergency timetable. I was grateful to the Minister for meeting me a few weeks ago to discuss the issue, as Southern presented a sort of plan for getting through the industrial dispute. Then, with no warning and no briefing at all, the emergency timetable was introduced. In my constituency, that involved pretty much the wholesale withdrawal of commuter rail services on the Southern part of the network. Only one train out of four or five an hour run, and my constituents simply cannot get on to those trains because they are too full.

The franchise needs to be withdrawn. Enough is enough. Patience has run out. The franchise needs to be passed to Transport for London, which has a track record of running decent Overground rail services in the capital. That is what passengers want and there are huge levels of support for it. I accept that TfL cannot do that in a single step but we are in a crisis, and I call on the Minister to take action to allow the Department for Transport to take over in the interim while arrangements can be made to transfer the franchise to TfL.

3.29 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for securing this debate. I speak on behalf of both myself and my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd). We share the two worst-performing rail operators—Southern and Southeastern—and we bear our crosses as best we can.

I am also a daily commuter, mostly on Southern. I spend about three-and-a-half hours on my commute, so I experience the same frustration, anger and stories that many right hon. and hon. Members have detailed today. In Bexhill and Hastings we have suffered the emergency timetable, which has affected our two-carriage train. The train does not perform that regularly, and it is now even worse. The timetable is causing real misery for our constituents in both towns.

I am a member of the Select Committee on Transport, and I can perhaps bring a little optimism to the room. It was a delight to have the leader of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, the chief executive of Southern and the rail Minister at our inquiry into Southern’s performance. The session made it clear that there is some common ground. The key now is to get everyone around the table. With respect to the RMT, we finally got it to agree that, really, this just comes down to jobs. The union could call it safety, and I could call it union subs, but it comes down to a guarantee that there will be a second member of staff on the trains. The Committee was reassured to hear from the chief executive of Southern that that guarantee will be in place not only now but for the entirety of the franchise. Southern cannot give any more than that because it cannot go beyond its franchise terms. We then asked the rail Minister what can be done beyond that, and I hope that I am not misquoting her when I say that she was able to confirm that the guarantee will be in place for the next franchise, too.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said so forcibly, it is right for us to call out behaviour that we consider unreasonable. Who else is guaranteed a job for up to 10 years? Certainly not Members of Parliament. It is down to the unions to show a little more willingness. They have now responded by letter to say that they will call for a cessation of industrial action for a three-month period, which is a good start, but they must operate the rolling stock for which we have all been waiting for so long. If it turns out that a conductor cannot join a train but that the driver can close the doors, I would rather have that train run. The unions have to be reasonable.

The unions also have to be reasonable in helping to end the sickness issues. There is undoubtedly an issue that has to be ended, and the unions have the biggest responsibility for doing so. Those are my asks of the unions—they wrote back yesterday telling the rail Minister that they are willing to sit down and give talks a try. I urge her, and all concerned, to take up that offer.

3.32 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I join colleagues in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on securing this debate. It is no exaggeration to describe the situation on Southern railway as of crisis proportions. The impact on residents’ day-to-day lives is deep and profound. Lee Fenton, one of my neighbours in Coulsdon, lost his job because he was so persistently late for work. I have talked to people who have had to quit their jobs, to self-employed people who are losing earnings and whose businesses are no longer viable, and to parents who are not getting home in time to put their children to bed. These problems are profoundly affecting the day-to-day lives of tens of thousands of people.

Although industrial relations are, in the first instance, GTR’s responsibility, it is time for the Government to take a more active role in the industrial dispute and in [Helen Hayes]
matters of the railway’s performance, because this is more than just an industrial dispute on a railway, and it is about more than just how the railway operates. The dispute is profoundly affecting the lives of very many people. I share the view of the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) that problems on Southern railway and GTR go back at least two years, and a fresh start with a new franchise is needed. Southern’s public performance measure has been very low for well over a year.

I also agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) that performance, which has been very poor for a year, has become abysmal as a result of the industrial dispute. I am firmly of the view that the concerns expressed about safety are wholly without merit. As we have heard, 60% of GTR trains already run perfectly safely with driver-operated doors. Every single London underground train, where platform crowding is significantly worse than on Southern railway, works with driver-operated doors with no safety concerns at all.

I urge Labour Members to use their influence with the RMT, which I suspect is slightly more significant than mine, to urge an immediate cessation of this groundless dispute. Jobs have been guaranteed beyond the lifetime of the franchise, which is a generous offer, and pay and the number of people employed have been guaranteed. There are no reasonable grounds for the dispute. This is an urgent matter, and I urge the Minister to take control of the franchise and to get involved in resolving the industrial dispute, because our constituents, neighbours and residents cannot take this any longer. It simply must end.

3.35 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on securing this important debate on the performance, and frankly the failure, of GTR Thameslink. I am sitting next to my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes), and I must point out that this sickness has spread to Hampshire. Indeed, Southern has a toe in my constituency, and it must not be forgotten that services up from Swanwick and Bursledon and onward to Southampton Central. Those people avoid the A27 and the grind through Chichester, or the M27 heading to Littlehampton, Worthing, Hove or Brighton and the perils of the Chichester roundabout, in the hope of getting to work safe and sound. The safety considerations are, of course, off the trains. Yes, the unions might have a point, and perhaps we have not quite gotten to the bottom of that, but for me the safety considerations are about vulnerable people being left on the side of the railway.

We are a Government who stand up for working people, and it is time for us to stand up for passengers, workers, students, visitors and vulnerable people with children. There is an economic case for action on Southern trains, and I have previously asked the Minister a question on that in the Chamber. We have heard that the issue is blighting people’s lives day in, day out. It is not good enough.

I am also concerned about the safety of guards on trains. There is dangerous overcrowding late at night, with upset and angry people. Having seen the pictures of overcrowding at Victoria station, I am frankly surprised that there has not been a riot. The situation is dangerous. I do not want to over-egg or overhype it, but I have received feedback that people are frightened and concerned.

There is an economic case for us to support our businesses. We talk about Brexit and the problems that could affect our businesses, but the reality is that problems are happening now due to this franchise. I ask the Minister for a kind response and to think about all the families, workers and businesses who depend on the Government to make a substantial case for doing something. The time is now.

3.38 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on securing this crucial debate and on his tour de force. We were all impressed by what he had to say.

After little more than two years, GTR’s operation of the Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern franchise has been an unmitigated disaster, with the targets on punctuality and reducing delays breached long ago and followed by a series of inadequate compromises between the Department for Transport and GTR. The views of passengers, and their intense dissatisfaction with GTR’s performance, are being managed rather than met by the Government. There is insufficient protection of the passenger and public interest in the reliable operation of these vital rail services, which are essential to both the national economy and the millions of passengers who rely on them.

GTR’s tenure has led to the worst punctuality ratings of any train operator in the country; a doubling in the percentage of trains that were cancelled or delayed by more than half an hour; from 3.9% to 7.4% of services which, again, is worse than any other operator in the last reporting period; an average of 50.9% of trains on time, one of the worst ratings in the country; and one in three Gatwick Express trains running late. The list goes on.

The latest Transport Focus statistics make for dire reading for GTR and the Government, with passenger satisfaction in decline to an unacceptably low level. Only 35% of passengers on the Southern metro and Sussex coastway lines regard the service as value for money, following the introduction of the remedial plan.
Jeremy Quin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy McDonald: Will the hon. Gentleman forgive me if I do not? I want to give the Minister time to respond, and she has little enough.

As Members who represent constituencies on these lines know only too well, all these performance failures were visible on Southern GTR services well before any dispute with the rail unions over driver-only operation and prior to Southern services entering the Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern super-franchise in July 2015. We have also seen the operator of last resort, Directly Operated Railways, scaled back within DFT and removed from the Rail Delivery Group.

GTR is widely recognised as the worst train operator in the country, following a sustained period of cancellations, lateness, worsening industrial relations and failed planning that makes a mockery of the Government’s regular sermons on the benefits of rail privatisation. There is cross-party consensus on the need for GTR to be stripped of the franchise: my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna), the hon. Members for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) and for Croydon South (Chris Philp), the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and many others have all called for that. Even GTR acknowledges that it could have the franchise removed if it fails to deliver on targets in the franchise agreement. In this increasingly fractious affair, why is it only the Government who are not contemplating removing the franchise or even retaining the threat as a means of improving performance?

The Opposition would like to see our rail services back in public operation, but to ignore the clear evidence of the essential service protection that the public sector provides through the operator of last resort is entirely reckless. Perhaps GTR’s accounts shed more helpful light on the extent of its relationship with DFT and the purpose it serves. Under a section entitled “Political Risks”, GTR states:

“It is not anticipated that any significant political change in direction would affect the existing contract. The company’s senior management continue to work closely with the DFT to ensure consistency of messaging to try to manage stakeholder expectations.”

That may be standard language to reassure shareholders and investors, but it also strikes me as evidence of an unhealthy relationship in which the Government are committed to preserving the GTR franchise, whatever the cost to passengers, staff or the taxpayer. The taxpayer is paying GTR an estimated £1.17 billion every year in management fees for this dysfunctional service, and that does not include the huge levels of investment in track and stations through publicly owned Network Rail every year, including the redevelopment of London Bridge.

Neither sickness levels nor industrial action are responsible for the misery that Southern commuters in particular have contended with for more than a year now. The decline in industrial relations is a direct result of the close relationship between the Government and GTR. When senior civil servants are quoted at public meetings stating to passengers that they “have got to break” rail unions, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) said, the problem is entirely of the Government’s making.

Labour is clear that the Government’s failure to include meaningful penalties in the franchise is at the root of GTR’s declining performance. We call on the Government to strip GTR of the franchise. That is the only way in which sustainable improvements in performance can be achieved. The breach and default levels for service cancellations under the original franchise agreement with Givia have been consistently exceeded, and what we have seen in response is the imposition of a remedial plan cooked up between GTR and the DFT in February this year and kept away from prying eyes for three months. That raised breach and default levels for service cancellation, meaning that passengers would have to cope with up to 31,000 fewer services.

The Minister was absolutely right when she said in a debate on Southern in this Chamber almost exactly a year ago that high levels of delay and cancellation were “an unacceptable burden on working families.”—[Official Report, 8 July 2015; Vol. 598, c. 105WH.]

That burden is worse today, and it is the direct result of the Government’s handling of this franchise—indulging GTR and failing to respond to consistent failure with removal of the franchise.

Let me turn quickly to the current dispute. Even the industry-funded Rail Safety and Standards Board has acknowledged that driver-only operated services “may increase the likelihood of an event occurring or increase the severity of its consequence.”

The issue is whether risks to passengers increase when things go wrong if passengers no longer have a binding safety guarantee from a second member of on-board staff who is fully trained in safety-critical procedures. GTR’s proposed new role of an on-board supervisor will not be that of a guard or a conductor; it will lack critical safety training in carriage and passenger protection in the event of an emergency incident.

GTR and the Government have also claimed that there will be no deskilling or dumbing down as a result of the GTR proposals to extend DOO on Southern services, yet the Minister told members of the Transport Committee on Monday that no train that currently has a second person on board would lose that person, and that she would ensure that the safety-critical role is maintained. We hope she will confirm today that that safety-critical role will be maintained over the life of this and future franchises. Central to that is retaining the 12-week training requirement for the second member of train crew—whether that is a guard, a conductor or an on-board supervisor.

I note that the RMT offered last week to suspend its industrial action for three months, as long as GTR suspends the DOO extension plans for a similar length of time. It surely makes sense now for the Minister to invite the RMT to meet her at the earliest opportunity to discuss the terms of a settlement with GTR that would also apply to future franchises. That should allow both parties time to reach a conclusion to this dispute, if not to the performance problems that have dogged GTR since its inception, which we believe can only be remedied by removal of the franchise.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): I appreciate the opportunity to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I thank right hon. and
hon. Members on both sides for their contributions to this important debate. Before I look forwards, I want to take a couple of minutes to look back.

One of my first jobs on becoming rail Minister in 2014 was to go up the Shard and welcome this new franchise, and to celebrate the fact that the franchise had been awarded to an operator who, by all accounts, was well qualified to take it on. It had operated trains during the Olympics, when everything ran swimmingly, and it was appraised of the extent of the Thameslink disruption. It had an investment plan and a plan to redress the shortage of drivers—an issue that had bedevilled the previous franchise. Things seemed to be set fair.

In the summer of that year we saw the major blockades at London Bridge which caused massive disruption for people—not during the blockade but at points afterwards. Afterwards, we ran into weeks and weeks of problems. I got involved and we had a weekly quadrant meeting. My friend the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) said that we all now know far more about trains and franchising than we ever thought we would have to know.

In fairness, things were starting to work. Despite the lack of joined-up thinking about the impact of the London Bridge works on existing commuters, the major problems with Network Rail’s infrastructure reliability, which were not being addressed properly, and the series of changes, including Sir Peter Hendy coming in from TfL and taking direct control of all the infrastructure work in that area, everyone was pulling together, with the massive involvement of my officials, and in April the public performance measure got back to 83.6%.

Chris Philp: That is rubbish.

Mr Umunna: It is still terrible.

Claire Perry: It was not nearly good enough, but that was 10 percentage points up over the last six months. There was every view that performance was returning to the place where we needed it to be.

Since then—I will come to the issue of the industrial action—all bets are off. When people simply do not know how many staff are rostering in a particular depot, particularly the Brighton depot, where so many trains start and finish, it is impossible to run a reliable service. I have been to London Bridge and Victoria stations many times and travelled on the trains and I have been ashamed to be the rail Minister. I suggest that successive rail Ministers over many years in many Governments should share that sense of shame.

There seem to have been four fundamental failures in the industry that mean that when things go wrong, it is really hard to recover. It is the customers—the passengers who rely on the train services—who suffer. First, I submit to the House that there has been a disdain for people—for passengers—at the heart of the railway for decades. I have shared this anecdote with the House previously: a former very senior member of Network Rail said to me that the problem with the timetable is that the customers mess it up. Think about what that implies about what that person’s view of their job was: to run a system, not to move people.

Crowding is not really costed in any of the economic measures that successive Governments have used. There has just been an assumption that people will continue to cram on. It is more valuable to put a train on a long-distance service, where there is a discretionary choice of travel, than to relieve crowding on an overground service around London. That seems to me to be perverse.

Investment has been entirely focused on engineering improvements and almost never on reduction in delay. Why do we still have this “leaves on the line” problem every year? By the way, no one has ever calculated the economic consequences of leaves on the line. Surely it is not beyond the wit of our finest metallurgists to solve that problem, yet we just accept it. We plough on and look to shave five minutes off long-distance journeys.

Thameslink will deliver some significant benefits for people travelling through London. There are brand new trains and wonderful new stations such as Blackfriars, which nobody ever talks about. It is a wonderful station delivered without a trace. Nevertheless, the human cost of the Thameslink work on the travelling public was almost forgotten. I was not the Minister at the time and I do not even know under which Government it was planned, but a man came up to me at London Bridge station in tears and said, “You’re doing this so people can get from Cambridge to Brighton without disruption. That’s great, but I just want to get home to see my kids.” There is something flawed with the industry, because it does not value those people’s experiences.

The second failure is that, as Members know, the industry has a highly complicated structure. We have Network Rail, which is in a much better place now, post the Hendy review and Shaw changes. It has made some amazing hires. We have a franchising system that in some cases delivers huge benefits but in other cases does not. The problem with franchising is that if it is a very short-term franchise, nobody has an incentive to invest in industrial or passenger relations. Why would the staff care when the name on the nameplate changes every seven years?

Andy McDonald: They do care.

Claire Perry: They do care, but why would they feel an allegiance to a company the name of which changes every few years? The staff on the frontline care in extreme amounts, and we are all very grateful for that.

Andy McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Claire Perry: No, I am going to continue.

Thirdly, we have an investment structure that is broken. The Government step in over and over again to fill the gaps and to buy rolling stock. By the way, the profits in the rail industry mostly accrue to the rolling stock leasing companies—the ROSCOs. If Members look at the shareholder structures to see where the profits are, they will see that they are with the rolling stock companies, not the franchise operators. GTR’s margin this year is going to be around 1.5% on this franchise. There is something structurally wrong with the financial structure of the industry.

The fourth and final problem is that the contractual levers are really poor. I have been asked repeatedly, “Why don’t you just take the franchise back?” The reason is that I cannot. GTR is not in breach of its franchise contract right now.

Mr Umunna indicated dissent.
Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman knows—he has been involved in contracting—that we have a contractual structure and there are a series of inputs and outputs. The company is not in breach of them. People ask what happened with Directly Operated Railways. The franchise was handed back to the Government by East Coast. In such circumstances we can take it back in-house and do something with it, but at the moment I do not have the levers to pull to take the franchise back.

Chris Philp: Will the Minister give way?

Claire Perry: No. If I may, I will continue, because I want to try to address some action points. I will try to finish quickly.

If I thought it would help for me to fall on my sword, I would. I have thought about it repeatedly. I do not like failure. I do not fail at stuff in my life. This feels like a failure. Could I do something contractually to force the franchise to end early? Would the problems actually go away? Would the industrial action and staffing problems stop? No. Would the investment programme create anything more certain for passengers? No. In my view, it would do almost nothing. It feels like that scene in Tom Wolfe’s “The Right Stuff”, when the test pilot is “augering in”—into the ground—shouting:

“I’ve tried A! I’ve tried B! I’ve tried C! I’ve tried D! Tell me what else I can try!”

I take issue with the view that nobody cares. Charles Horton and Dyan Crowther really care. They have done so much work. They have been out there, briefing and working tirelessly. The emergency timetable was not just some fantasy; it was an attempt to try to deliver a reliable service that would actually work, by compressing staff and trains into the areas of greatest need and making sure that the services that were withdrawn were ones for which there were alternative routes. The front-line staff really care. Day after day, they are there, holding the line, dealing with angry customers and trying to cheer up passengers. Right hon. and hon. Members really care. We have all been on this journey for many years now. My Department cares passionately. Nobody is enjoying this process.

On industrial relations, it is true that doors operated by drivers are safe—61% of GTR trains are already operated using the technology. It is incredible what can be done through industrial action. Is it politically motivated? I do not know. Yesterday, the 5.36 service from London Victoria to Sutton was cancelled because an unknown person had been smoking in the driver’s cab and the driver was not happy to drive the train. The driver’s cab had to be aired and cleaned before it could be utilised, so the service was cancelled, causing knock-on delays throughout the day. To me, that does not feel like everybody pulling together to deliver a battle plan for customers who want to get home, which is what I think they should be doing.

What are we going to do? The one-month emergency timetable was today—at least as of 12 noon—delivering a 90.3% PPM on Southern. Everything could go wrong later in the day, but it looks like it is starting to work. That timetable will be in place for one month, and we need to monitor it closely. I want to bring forward compensation plans. That will involve negotiation with other parts of the Government, given that we are talking about revenue that is coming into the Government coffers, but I am very keen to deliver compensation. I have written to the next Prime Minister about this. She has a proposal to get customers and unions more closely involved in the management structure of companies, and GTR would be a perfect example of involving them. I do want to meet the unions and the management. I have been advised repeatedly to stay out of it—hell no! I want to sit people around the table and say, “What the hell is going on? Let’s try to sort this out.”

Over the medium term, I want to accelerate the plan for the devolution of rail services to London. It is absolutely right to do that and it will deliver capacity on inner-London and suburban routes. I do not care about the politics and I do not care that there is a Labour Mayor; I just want the trains to run better. I also want to look at a new structure. In the Shaw report, we gave ourselves permission to look at new ways of running the railway. Could we put rolling stock and infrastructure together in a way that delivers a better service for passengers?

Although GTR is a highly complicated franchise—it is the busiest, most complicated thing in the country—it could be the perfect way to try to get everyone to focus on delivering a service. Would it not be great to be proud of the services that were bringing people into the greatest city in the UK, rather than ashamed? That is what I want, and I know it is what we all want. I may not be the Minister to deliver it, but as sure as hell I will keep trying until I am kicked out.

3.58 pm

Tim Loughton: From Streatham to Horsham, from Fareham to Bexhill, from Dulwich to Lewes, our constituents are angry, for all the reasons that have been laid out very passionately by the more than 20 Members present for the debate. With respect to the Minister, I did not want a history of the railways. I did not mention leaves on the line. I certainly would not hold up an 83% PPM as a badge of honour, because that means that almost one in five trains are still running very, very late. She said that the company was not in breach. When on earth will it technically be in breach? We need to know that.

I asked about the financial implications for the company and the Government, but answer came there none. Will the Minister please write to us so that we can understand at what point this nightmare will come to an end? The hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) described it as toothache, but the pain that our constituents are suffering is more like serious root canal surgery. My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said that we need to blame the unions. We do, but we also need to blame the non-21st century management practices of GTR for their not getting around the table and doing something about it.

In none of the vocabulary I heard from the Minister were the passengers the most important part for the solutions we need to achieve. I say to her: I know it is difficult to take back the franchise, but please, please, set down some parameters for when such action might be triggered, or tell us what else you are going to do about it.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
South Manchester Transport Infrastructure

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I beg to move,

That the House has considered transport infrastructure in South Manchester.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mrs Main, and to see other Members here in Westminster Hall. I take this opportunity to thank the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), whom I am pleased to see is still in his post after what has been a very busy day.

I have worked with fellow members of the Communities and Local Government Committee to scrutinise the Government’s landmark devolution legislation. I must confess that, as the Member for Cheadle, I have a vested interest in its success. Cheadle is a constituency that sits within the Greater Manchester city region, which has already benefited from £7.6 billion funding towards the northern powerhouse.

Good transport links are key to the success of the northern powerhouse. Indeed, the enabling powers in the devolution legislation are crucial for regional ambitions for business to deliver prosperity at a time when now, more than ever, effective connectivity and transport infrastructure from the suburbs to the city are vital. I am therefore grateful to be able to raise this issue with the Minister, thereby providing an opportunity for my constituents to be reassured that the Government are committed to building the northern powerhouse, to encouraging investment in transport, and to underwriting our ambition as a city region that is easy to do business with. We need to correct traditional regional imbalances, and transport is a vital element of achieving that objective.

Greater Manchester is a major region, with 2.7 million inhabitants. In total, our Government aim to spend £13 billion on transport during this Parliament to support our local road network, which has already benefited from £7.6 billion funding towards the northern powerhouse. Infrastructure workhorse of our communities, and as growth is planned we must remember that our roads are not only lines on a map but a vital means for people to live their lives. Clearly, there are areas where roads are stretched beyond their capacity. A prime example is what was once a simple junction connecting the communities of Cheadle and Gatley that now blights the lives of pedestrians and drivers. It is in the light of these pressures that I will talk about the road network in my constituency.

Unfortunately, well-intentioned but small-scale interventions over the past 20 years have not been enough to tackle the problems of this junction and to make it fit for the future. As one of the five busiest junctions in Greater Manchester, it experiences the passage of 74,500 cars a week. In addition, esure insurance recently found it to be the sixth worst junction in the country for drivers jumping red lights. Plainly, it is operationally substandard.

That has placed a great strain on the wider road network, creating tailbacks along the M60 just a few hundred metres away and creating congestion for a considerable part of my constituency and on to the A34 and the A560 at Gatley. The M60, which has two slip roads on to the A34, further adds to local congestion and environmental challenges. Over time, efforts to improve the working of the junction have included the creation of an eastbound left-turn lane for traffic approaching from Gatley, as well as the installation of traffic signals on the nearby off-slip from the M60 to better regulate traffic flow into the junction. More recently, the junction has benefited from the actuation systems to adjust signal timings in response to changes in traffic flow. However, it remains a major problem for the area.

Long-term transport problems were identified in the catchily titled South East Manchester Multi Modal Strategy, which is known locally as SEMMMS. SEMMMS was first produced in 2001 and is now due for reconsideration.

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I am also aware of the memorably titled SEMMMS project. Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the main causes of road congestion in Stockport is the lack of an A6 bypass from Hazel Grove to Bredbury, which would join with the M60? If she does, will she urge the Minister to consider that project for future funding?

Mary Robinson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We need to make that change a change for the better, with the potential to generate local and international business, creating global connectivity for Britain’s second city, as well as for the periphery.

The Greater Manchester Transport Strategy 2040 and its consultation document, which was released last week, are explicit about the need for transport to address long-term challenges in Greater Manchester that are inclusive of but not limited to our growing population.

As local plans are put in place to deliver the housing needs of the city region, our local road network is the infrastructure workhorse of our communities, and as growth is planned we must remember that our roads are not only lines on a map but a vital means for people to live their lives. Clearly, there are areas where roads are stretched beyond their capacity. A prime example is what was once a simple junction connecting the communities of Cheadle and Gatley that now blights the lives of pedestrians and drivers. It is in the light of these pressures that I will talk about the road network in my constituency. One of the most pressing issues for my constituents is indeed the junction of the A34 and the A560 at Gatley.

Long-term transport problems were identified in the catchily titled South East Manchester Multi Modal Strategy, which is known locally as SEMMMS. SEMMMS was first produced in 2001 and is now due for reconsideration.
I look forward to the refreshment of the SEMMMS plan, which is ongoing, and I will press for further consideration of the A34 corridor plan, which will explore the A34’s intersection with the M60. That plan will enable Transport for Greater Manchester to develop a more detailed understanding of the long-term growth implications along the A34 and to identify further areas of improvement to manage congestion. These problems need to be addressed both imminently—indeed, immediately—and for the longer term. This junction is broken and we need to fix it.

It is a fact that alongside Greater Manchester’s growing economic strength—growth that creates new employment and development opportunities across the wider conurbation, including Stockport—pressure continues to be put on local highway networks. There is particular pressure at junctions where there are complex flows of traffic wanting to access the city, Manchester Airport, the M60, the M56 and, very importantly for my constituents, local facilities and residential areas.

Further pressures on the general network and the A34 corridor are also in the spotlight as the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework and the Cheshire East local plan are being drawn up. It is clear that local plans must take into account the implications of increased developments, and where there are cross-boundary transport infrastructure issues it is vital to have co-operation between all stakeholders, including central Government.

I will highlight for the Minister the need for continued investment in the north. I welcome all the investment that we have had so far, but I am firmly focused on the north’s future. I have also stressed the importance of smaller infrastructure projects—yes, we need High Speed 2 and High Speed 3, but we also need to underwrite this ambition with support for large but more local projects.

I am pleased that for Members whose constituencies have problematic junctions, the Government have committed themselves to investment, delivering the biggest road improvement programme since the 1970s. Continuing that commitment will be imperative.

Infrastructure investment is represented by the £475 million Local Majors fund, which is designed to support local transport projects. That is an example of the type of investment funds we need in the wake of the referendum. Indeed, these smaller scale but large local projects also need prioritising.

I have had meetings with the interim mayor of Greater Manchester and the strategic transport director of Transport for Greater Manchester to discuss applications for the fund and the role I can play in facilitating them. I encourage the Minister to continue making local authorities aware so that we can all benefit from the potential prosperity the funds can generate. In my constituency, we look forward to progress being made on the changes—so urgently required at the Gatley junction, and that should be considered as part of the wider SEMMMS strategy.

I am conscious of time, but I want to touch briefly on the ambitious developments in high-speed rail. HS2 will sweep into the north. I know I am touching on the programme with a brevity that does not do justice to its importance, but with phase 2a to Crewe opening in 2027 and the delivery of phase 2b marked for completion in 2033, there can be no further delay to the roll-out of the UK’s largest infrastructure project, through which the north can benefit from increased capacity to meet demand. I therefore look forward to the legislation being brought forward later this year for phase 1. Although I appreciate the extension of timetables for delivery to allow the petitions process, I urge the Government to take steps to prevent further delays to the opening of the first step to high-speed rail.

From a local perspective, I am pleased that the ambitious project of HS2 will come close to Cheadle at Manchester airport, but I would welcome further assurances on that crucial airport link to move from planes to trains. Additionally, I welcome the commitment to modernise and renew the rolling stock, with a move away from Pacers—many commuters between Cheadle and Manchester will echo my views—following Arriva’s new franchise around Manchester. I know passengers would welcome an increase in the capacity and comfort of local journeys. I also highlight the need for investment in stations, particularly through working cross-departmentally with the Department for Communities and Local Government to improve station environments, such as that at Cheadle Hulme in my constituency. In addition, I will be looking for greater responsibilities for franchises to invest in ticketing, to make it easier and more comfortable to travel and to use the networks to the full.

William Wragg: Does my hon. Friend agree about the importance of working with friends groups at those stations? They can do great work in drawing attention to the needs of the stations and to station improvements.

Mary Robinson: I echo my hon. Friend’s point. Friends groups in all walks of life play an important part in our constituencies, particularly with regard to our railway stations. I am looking forward to hearing about improvements that could be made to get much needed disability access in our stations. We have so many people calling for that; it is about time it was delivered.

Better bus services are also critical to unlocking growth in our communities, reducing congestion, supporting the elderly in socialising and helping to improve our environment. The Bus Services Bill, which hands franchising powers down to local authorities, will better enable those authorities to tackle priorities for improvements that will increase passenger numbers and deliver more benefits. Those benefits must continue to include connectivity, and, whether it be through smart cards or better branding, getting more people to hop on a bus rather than get in the car. Central to that are more frequent services. It is always disappointing when we hear about services being reduced, such as the X57 service, or withdrawn, such as the 373. That takes away a valuable link between constituents and their work, home and hospitals. I am keen to see measures put in place to enable local authorities to influence timetabling to better reflect local need. Furthermore, the Bill and franchising offer the prospect of improved disability access, which we need, whether that is through innovative visual or audio capability or better disability training, so that drivers know where to pull in at bus stops. I have drawn local stakeholders’ attention to Muscular Dystrophy UK’s Trailblazers report on improving access for young disabled people.
In closing, I seek assurance from the Minister that current and future programmes will continue to be funded as has already been pledged. We all appreciate the changes now in train—excuse the pun—owing to recent national developments, but the future prosperity of the north and my constituency must be maintained. Following the decision made three weeks ago tomorrow, there is a strong argument for more infrastructure investment and delivery, and that needs to take place with the small-scale and long-term, large-scale projects.

The northern powerhouse concept is crucial not only to the prosperity of the north-west of England, but to the whole of the north and the country itself. If it is to succeed, we must be committed to its funding, to improvements to roads and junctions, to the construction of HS2 and HS3, and to the transport infrastructure of Greater Manchester in all its forms. This is undoubtedly an exciting time for the Greater Manchester region. Now more than ever our attention is turning to the north, and power is moving from Whitehall to local communities as a result of our devolution process. I look forward to the prosperity I know that will bring to my constituents, Manchester and the north.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) on securing this debate. Transport is hugely important to Greater Manchester. We agree entirely that it is essential for growth and we are, as she said, investing significantly in it. Through our devolution deals, we are putting Greater Manchester at the heart of the northern powerhouse.

As my hon. Friend knows, we are committed to creating a northern powerhouse, which is effectively about rebalancing our economy. It is part of a much broader national long-term plan. We have created Transport for the North to be a key partner and delivery body within that agenda. Its job will be to develop and drive forward transport plans to support the economic growth of the north. In terms of capital expenditure, we will invest £13 billion in this Parliament to better connect the region so that northern towns and cities can pool their strengths and create a single economy. From being a fragmented economy, it will become a much more cohesive one that is more than the sum of its parts.

I agree entirely with my hon. Friend: this is an exciting time for Greater Manchester. There is no question about that. Greater Manchester is at the heart of an exciting agenda. It is a centre of innovation, education, industry and culture. Its local enterprise partnership describes it as the fastest growing economy outside London and Europe’s most competitive business location. South Manchester, with its key assets such as Manchester airport and Stockport, is obviously right at the heart of the region’s success.

My hon. Friend was broad in her sweep of transport in the area, and I will try to match that and then focus on some of the local points that were made. Manchester airport is the UK’s third largest airport. It employs 20,000 people, indirectly supports a further 25,000 and contributes £1.8 billion annually to the economy. That is a fantastic record. In addition, the £650 million airport city enterprise zone promises to create between 7,000 and 13,000 jobs. The airport announced its £1 billion transformation programme last June, through which it will employ more people and create more wealth in the area. The airport’s success is tremendous news for the north as a whole and in particular for Greater Manchester and my hon. Friend’s constituents. However, transport infrastructure needs to be in place to support that growth. People need to be able to get to the airport to benefit from it.

The south-east Manchester multi-modal strategy, or SEMMMS, highlighted the significant problems experienced in south Manchester. The proposed solutions have sat on the shelf for years, including the A6 to Manchester airport relief road. I am delighted that we have been able to support that important scheme, which brings significant benefits to the residents of the areas where traffic will be reduced, to those who will be able to access Manchester airport much more easily and to all those who will benefit from the economic growth that the scheme will bring across the area. Our support for the scheme shows that we are serious about working with local partners, because a partnership has brought the scheme to fruition. The overall budget is well over £200 million, but the Department’s contribution is £165 million—a proper partnership that shows we are serious about engaging with local partners to deliver the world-class transport network that the area requires.

My hon. Friend mentioned the strategic road network. The road network is under pressure in Manchester, because of a growing population and growing economic activity. We are investing £1.5 billion in the north-west in our road investment strategy, which will deliver the biggest increase in capacity since 1971. That includes an upgrade to the strategic roads serving south Manchester. Work is under way to deliver the smart motorway upgrade for the M66 junction 8 to M62 junction 20, and the A556 Knutsford to Bowdon scheme, which will improve the main southern access to Manchester. Further work is planned to upgrade the M60 to a smart motorway between junctions 24 and 4, and to upgrade the M56 to a smart motorway between junctions 6 and 8. In addition, my Department has an ongoing study on the case for building a trans-Pennine tunnel, which is potentially a transformational project. It has been long discussed in the north, as the hon. Lady knows—for decades. We are investigating the potential for that transformational new connection between Manchester and Sheffield. A study on the M60 north-west quadrant is looking at improvements that could benefit the area and the whole M60 route.

My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) never misses an opportunity to highlight the extreme importance of developing the trans-Pennine links. As ever, we are in full agreement on this issue. He is right to champion them and our commitment has not wavered.

We are starting the process for the second road investment strategy, which will be for the period post-2020. We are trying to make it a much more open and locally driven procedure. Contributions are coming in from local highways authorities, local councils, local enterprise partnerships and Transport for the North, and they will help to determine the priorities for the strategy. I have written to colleagues, as have Highways England, so that the in-depth knowledge that MPs have of the area, its problems and the potential for future development can inform the process and make it as good as it can be.
Rail in the area is obviously fundamentally important as well. We have the biggest programme of railway modernisation under way since the reign of Queen Victoria. The north of England rail infrastructure upgrade programme will transform rail travel in the region. Work has begun and we are already seeing some real progress. In 2013, we saw the first phase of north-west electrification, enabling electric trains to run from Manchester airport to Glasgow. In 2014, we knocked 15 minutes off the fastest journey time between Liverpool and Manchester, and in 2015, we completed the electrification of the railway between Liverpool and Manchester, and with Liverpool and Wigan. I have been to see the progress made, have experienced the benefits, and have spoken to some of the train operating company’s team working there, and some passengers. It has been very well received. Of course there is much more to be done.

Our programme of more than £1 billion includes a substantial electrification programme and other track, station and signalling improvements, to increase capacity and the number of services, making journeys faster and more reliable. The transformative new TransPennine Express and Northern Rail franchises will deliver high-quality services for passengers. For south Manchester, that will include a significant increase in the capacity into Manchester in the morning peak and more seats on TransPennine Express trains; more trains to a range of major destinations right across the north; new and refurbished trains offering significantly enhanced passenger benefits; and—this has caught people’s attention more than any other announcement—the outdated Pacers will go. They will go from the north’s railways by 2019, to be replaced with significantly upgraded trains. I know the frustration that people have with the Pacers; they also serve my own line and I use them on a weekly basis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle made a good point that it is not just about rolling stock or infrastructure—we need station enhancements too. That is clearly a priority. Disability access is a top priority for the Department, as part of the access programme. The Department is producing an accessibility action plan, which will be published later this year, and will focus on how we can make the public transport network much more friendly for everybody within our communities. It is worth highlighting that Northern has committed to spend more than £30 million on station upgrades across the franchise over the coming years. That might address some of my hon. Friend’s concerns about Cheadle Hulme station. My hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) is right: friends groups play a great role in being champions for their stations and making them open, friendly, informative places that people go to rather than scuttle through in a hurry, as they might have in the past.

We must mention HS2, which will be a huge boost to Manchester and the surrounding area. It will bring jobs, growth and regeneration opportunities. A station at Manchester airport will help bring those benefits to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle, as well as to many other constituencies in the area. It will provide additional connectivity for the region, allowing passengers to access the high-speed rail network without first travelling into central Manchester. I agree with my hon. Friend’s request for urgency. It is an important scheme, which is critical to the Government’s programme, and we do not want to see any delay.

Local transport was a key part of my hon. Friend’s contribution. She clearly identified the pressure that the local highway network is under in south Manchester. There has been some investment to address that, but it is a significant challenge. Measures to improve traffic flow on the M60 at junctions 3, 4 and 5 are underway, as is work on the traffic signal control at the junction of the M60 and the A34.

Moving on to public transport, improvements at Cheadle Hulme and Hazel Grove railway stations are under way, as are priority bus routes into central Manchester. Metrolink has been extended to Manchester airport, where a third rail platform has just opened. New transport interchanges have been built at Altrincham and Wythenshawe. Some £115 million from the local growth fund is being invested to improve transport access in Stockport town centre. It is a very exciting time to be involved in public transport in Greater Manchester.

There are clear pinch points. The junction of the A34 and the A560, as highlighted by my hon. Friend, is a well-known problem. I understand that she met recently with a former colleague, the interim mayor Tony Lloyd, to discuss that junction. I am sure she will be aware of the A34 corridor plan being developed as part of a wider refresh of the south-east Manchester multi-modal strategy. Although I share her sense that this is a priority, it is a local network and local decision. She must therefore work closely with local partners to ensure that they are aware of the concerns and bring forward robust proposals to tackle the congestion. It is well known not just in her own area, but beyond. I will make sure that officials from the Department for Transport keep in touch with that work as it develops and inform me of progress so that I can see what is happening.

We have covered a lot of ground, and have not even got to the Bus Services Bill, which is an opportunity for change in the bus market. The Bill is about to have its third day in Committee in the House of Lords, and will head to our place shortly, I hope. Greater Manchester has said that it is keen to explore franchising options. The Bill will include powers to enable local authorities to have greater input and control over the bus market. Buses are part of the future of public transport. They are underestimated and underinvested in, but my hon. Friend was right to highlight their importance. They are essential to deliver the heavy lifting of our public transport system, as well as air quality improvements in our towns and city centres. The Bus Services Bill is very interesting.

We are investing heavily in transport across the UK, but especially in the north as part of our initiative to drive the northern powerhouse. That work is taking place right across modes of transport. We are seeing significant, record-breaking levels of investment and the Department is working in partnership with local bodies, especially Transport for the North, which we will put on to a statutory basis within some months, to make sure that the plans reflect local need, and that we deliver the transport for the area required to make the economy thrive for the future.

Question put and agreed to.
Capsticks Report and NHS Whistleblowing

4.29 pm

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered whistleblowing in the NHS and the Capsticks report into Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mrs Main. On 22 March 2016, the “Quality, safety and management assurance review at Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust” report by Capsticks solicitors was publicly released, following a serious and substantial investigation and examination of the litany of failures, misuse of power, intimidation of staff and patient harm that was allowed to go unchecked and unchallenged at Liverpool Community Health in the four years to April 2014. Some 43 individuals gave evidence to the review over 24 weeks, and almost 900 documents, spanning more than 19,000 pages, were reviewed.

The findings are clear: from 2010 to 2014, the trust’s pursuit of foundation status was its sole priority. The review compares LCH to Mid Staffs on the basis of the brutal tunnel vision that led to an unsafe drive for savings at all costs, compromised the quality of patient care, fostered bullying and harassment of staff on an industrial scale, and made possible the culture of concealment and denial at board level. The report’s findings are even more damning, given that all this took place after Mid Staffs and the publication of the initial Francis report. It demonstrates that, in pockets of the NHS, the events at Mid Staffordshire have changed little if anything at all. It prompts the question, to what extent is this happening in other trusts up and down the country?

The report paints a stark and harrowing picture of far-reaching failure, driven from the very top of the organisations where individuals have escaped the consequences of their actions to date. Sadly, the same cannot be said for the patients and staff of the organisation, which abjectly failed them.

I do not intend to go through the Capsticks report in great detail, as it is publicly available for people to read. Instead, I want to add background detail and put a human face to the words it contains. I want to talk about my experience of what can only be described as the very worst of the national health service.

I got involved in LCH simply because my father was admitted to ward 2A—a GP-led community ward at the Royal Liverpool hospital, run by LCH. The quality of my dad’s care was not great, and despite meeting managers and eventually a doctor, I remained unhappy with the care and remarked that I would speak to the Care Quality Commission. I was very surprised that staff members encouraged me to do so. It was the bravery of the ward staff, who spoke out about the horrific situation at LCH, that led to three years’ work to expose the true situation. And we are not there yet. No whistleblower has come to harm in this investigation, because I took the heat.

Once staff felt able to confide in me, many other people from across the various services with equally horrendous experiences of patient care, mismanagement and staff mistreatment spoke out, too. The Capsticks report enabled their voices to be heard, but it was limited because it was a governance review, not a clinical review. I am seeking investigations by a range of regulatory and professional bodies—including NHS Improvement, the Care Quality Commission, the General Medical Council, the Nursing and Midwifery Council, the Royal College of Nursing, the Health and Care Professions Council, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, and the Health and Safety Executive—into the failures at LCH as an organisation and by individuals.

However, one fundamental question remains unanswered. We still do not know the full extent of the harm caused by LCH. Justice demands a public inquiry, or at least an inquiry in public. We cannot try to hide what went on. A refusal to undertake a clinical assessment of the harm would be an admission that Mid Staffs and the Francis inquiry have changed absolutely nothing, and that the lives lost unnecessarily and prematurely in the care of the NHS had no value. Is that really the state of our NHS in 2016?

Despite the information that I have presented, detailing the extent of failures at LCH, there remains a determination among some members of the NHS senior management to minimise the LCH revelations. They are of the view that the Capsticks report should not have been commissioned, and that the dismantling of the organisation will bring scrutiny of the entire system’s failures to an end. It will not. I promised those who put their trust in me that I would not let that happen. I will keep at this until we have the whole truth and those who are responsible are held to account. The Minister might reflect on why those in senior positions who knew something did not believe that the duty of candour applied to them, and why there seemed to be no consequences.

The Capsticks report paints a stark picture of far-reaching failure that emanated from the top of the organisation, where the pursuit of foundation trust status had consequences for patients and staff at LCH, and financial considerations rode roughshod over the quality of care. A combination of driving down recurring costs and minimising expenditure on front-line services meant that the trust could create the impression of a healthy financial organisation, enabling it to become an FT. All its key performance indicators were financial. No one seemed to notice that all reference to quality status had consequences for patients and staff at LCH, and financially, considerations rode roughshod over the quality of care. A combination of driving down recurring costs and minimising expenditure on front-line services meant that the trust could create the impression of a healthy financial organisation, enabling it to become an FT. All its key performance indicators were financial. No one seemed to notice that all reference to quality disappeared.

Efficiency savings are usually 2% to 4% a year in the NHS. At LCH, there were several services for which the initial cost improvement programme proposed a 50% planned reduction in the overall budget within a single financial year. Those ludicrous budget cuts were described by the interim chief executive as “erratic”—“dangerous” is the word I would use. Those cuts could be driven through because there was a lack of a clear, transparent and robust quality impact assessment process to support the cost improvement programme. The situation was compounded by the executive team’s deception of the trust’s board in the implementation of the cost improvement programme.

The Capsticks report shows no evidence that the board had any discussions about the impact of the CIP on staff and their ability to deliver safe and effective healthcare to patients. Between 2011 and 2014, more
than £20 million was stripped out of front-line services. In the district nursing service, there was an underspend of £2.8 million, which meant that some areas were left to run at 50% of safe staffing levels. Stressed nurses worked unpaid long after their shift had finished to ensure that patients received essential treatment and medication. Working alone without alarms, they had to go into houses where there were drugs and guns, having been told by their managers, “That’s your job.”

In 2014, the deluded former chief executive wrote to me that the trust had reduced grade 3 pressure sores by more than 30%, and benchmarked against best practice. The reality was that the number of patients with avoidable, agonising pressure sores, which reach right down to the bone, rose sixfold as nurses frantically scuttled round the city trying to catch up. Staff were put in harm’s way. One nurse was held hostage at knifepoint by the relative of a patient she was visiting, and was seriously sexually assaulted. The attacker was given a custodial sentence.

Clinical governance between 2010 and early 2012 was the responsibility of the director of finance. He had never previously worked in the NHS and had no clinical experience, yet he was responsible for reporting serious untoward incidents to the board. I have been told that even the person in charge of nurse prescribing had no clinical background: he was a fitness instructor.

The incident initially reported to the director of finance was relayed to the chief exec, the human resources director, the medical director, and the director of operations and chief nurse. The executive nurse promised a “root cause analysis”. This never happened; nor was there a proper investigation, which was a breach of trust policy. No one seemed to notice. The director of finance stated as part of the Salmon process that the director of operations and executive nurse, and the health and safety reporting system “both downplayed the seriousness of the incident.”

The minutes of the board meeting on 23 September 2014, at which the report of the interim chief executive and interim nursing director was presented, state that “CG”—Craig Gradden, the medical director—“confirmed that it had been reported in the ‘Weekly Meeting of Harm’, but had not been reported to the Board, as it had been risk rated too low”.

So sexual assault of a nurse was risk-rated too low to be reported to the board—it was rated lower than a stolen personal computer or the parking problems at Burlington House.

Questioning the credibility of the medical director, he Capsticks report states: “We also do not as a review team accept the comments made to us that the serious nature of the incident was not known at the time. Our reading of the Dental Trust that incident clearly indicates the nature and seriousness of the incident.”

The chief executive, Bernie Cuthel, told Capsticks that she was not aware of the severity of the incident, but she managed to send the nurse a handwritten note.

The incident was not reported to the Health and Safety Executive either, presumably because the trust knew that it would be found wanting, as it had no proper lone-worker policy and staff did not have any alarms. Why did staff have no alarms? Because they cost too much money. The trust even charged the nurse who was assaulted for access to the internal investigation records. How the LCH executive directors reacted to that incident demonstrated the utter inhumanity of those shameless individuals. Only under the new leadership has the incident been properly investigated.

There are other failures right across the organisation, where finance was given priority over the quality of care. At one point, the trust’s in-patient services had 33 vacancies and an 11% staff sickness rate. How were they expected to maintain high standards of care? One nurse told me that she was left with one healthcare assistant to look after 18 ill patients, and when a senior manager arrived, his only comment was about the noticeboard.

Poor, ill and often elderly patients were expected to run around the city trying to get appointments to see district nurses. GPs gave me many examples, including that of one lady who, after a hysterectomy, needed an infected wound dressed. She was forced to go daily to different treatment centres in different parts of the city by taxi, because she was not fit to catch a bus; it cost her more than her income for the week. In another case, a patient was left waiting for four months for a health assessment, leaving their lung cancer undiagnosed and eventually inoperable. The equipment service was in disarray: I have seen photographs of wheelchairs for the use of patients stored in a gents toilet.

In prison healthcare services, which the trust ran before 2015, the abject failure of oversight by the board was shocking—shocking in the extreme. The service, including meds management, still requires thorough investigation. Basic health checks for new prisoners to assess their risk of suicide were not carried out, with tragic consequences. The prisons ombudsman was ignored, and the coroner now recognises organisational failure.

Staff, as well as patients, paid the price. Where there was resistance to the planned cost improvements and their consequences, the human resources function was used not to support staff but to enforce, leading to a culture of bullying and harassment. The community dental service faced a cut of £2.7 million, or 49% of its overall budget—a reduction of 50 whole-time equivalent staff. When the clinical directors tried to point out the risks to patient care, they were suspended on concocted grounds and faced disciplinary action in an effort to silence them. There are many more examples.

My first awareness of the bullying culture at LCH was in the intermediate care bed-based unit where my father was admitted. I was told by whistleblowers that nurses in the service who spoke out were bullied, and that three senior members of staff were on suspension without even having been given reasons for their suspension, although that later changed, after challenge, to redeployment in a non-clinical role for no given reason. These matters remained unresolved for more than a year, until the new team arrived. People had been moved out of the way.

Driving home one night after a day of managerial mayhem, one nurse with a family and decades of service to the NHS in a role she loved, pulled her car to the side of the road and seriously contemplated suicide. Another nurse, in the prison service, received foul racist texts from her senior manager. He was appalled and told her so. Little did he realise that that would be the end of his NHS career. He was suspended for more than a year,
then sacked and reported to the Nursing and Midwifery Council, although eventually cleared. The manager was not even disciplined.

Management failings went unchallenged. In one particularly shocking case, a whistleblower has alleged that a prisoner with dementia was placed in a tumble dryer at HMP Liverpool for the amusement of prison and health staff. It is alleged that when he tried to get out, it was a nurse who pushed him back in.

The report’s description of scoping meetings is illuminating:

“people...described the culture and atmosphere as being designed to find personal fault and that the presence of a representative from Human Resources at these meetings, which in our view is most unusual, further exacerbated that feeling.”

Staff knew it was dangerous to speak up.

Staff availing themselves of occupational health psychological services were limited to six weeks’ support, but so great was the threat of harm to them, that some were still receiving help for more than a year. The number and severity of these cases was drawn to the attention of LCH executives by the trust providing the services, because they were outside the provider contract and required extra resource. Even that did not make a difference.

The report offers us an insight into the scale of the HR problems that existed: 332 known employee relations cases, including eight cases of bullying and harassment, 111 disciplinary cases, 26 grievances, one whistleblowing, 20 capability cases and 166 sickness sanctions—all that in a small community trust. The view of the interim chief executive offers some insight into those figures:

“When coming across grievances that were in the system, some of them were two or three years out and not resolved. I came across individual members of staff who had been on suspension for up to nine or ten months and the full time officers couldn’t even tell me why they were suspended.”

The mechanisms to protect staff, such as JNCC—joint negotiation and consultative committee—meetings, did not function effectively; they actually gave false assurance. The meetings were attended by the board chair and considered bullying cases regularly, but nothing changed because managers were used to enforce the directives of the executives, and for people who did not do as they were told, there were consequences. Even the ACAS report talked of employees being “fitted up”.

There were cliques, and someone whose face fitted would be invited to join the Friday night Prosecco club, also known as the “Montrose mafia”. When someone was suspended or fired or resigned from the stress of it all, a member of the clique would be moved into the position, without proper process, in order to deliver “the programme”, which also meant overlooking the shortcomings of the executives, which were many. I was always astounded that everyone knew that Helen Lockett did her LCH on-call duty from Bristol. She was not even in Liverpool. Safe? I don’t think so. As one staff member interviewed by the Capsticks team said:

“In fact it’s probably the most un-healthy organisation I’ve ever worked in by some distance at that time. Just because those key individuals...forgot what we were actually...here to do.”

On 5 February 2014, I asked the Prime Minister to forensically examine the history of HR practice, disciplinary action and subsequent payoffs. He said he would happily do so. I believe in good faith, because he thought the CQC could do that, which it turns out it cannot. I ask the Minister, when the HR department is used as a weapon to enforce the rule of a trust, rather than the law of the land, who is policing it?

A vast amount of taxpayers’ money is wasted on paying for lawyers and subsequent compensation for victims as careers and lives are destroyed. The Department of Health and professional bodies such as CIPD surely should act. The evidence of a pervasive culture of bullying and harassment at LCH reinforces Capsticks’ opinion that the executive team were “out of their depth.”

We might think that an executive team that slashed £20 million from front-line services, causing patient and staff harm, would guard every penny. We would be wrong. They spent more than £350,000 on drumming up support for their application for foundation trust status. They spent more than £1 million on a programme management office of external consultants to tell them how to save money. At the trust’s annual meeting in 2013, the same year the board slashed £7 million from front-line services, its leadership team still managed to find enough money to hire jugglers, unicyclists, stilt-walkers and a life-sized elephant to greet guests—I am not kidding. In the same period, the chief executive’s pay increased by nearly a third, from £95,000 to around £130,000 a year.

In 2014, when the CQC at long last began to expose the extent of the leadership failures at LCH, the trust board’s first reaction was to spend £11,000 on a crisis communications consultant. In January 2014, as I pressed hard and still harder for answers and immediate changes for staff and patients, board members spent almost £1,000 on legal advice in an attempt to browbeat me and prevent parliamentary and public scrutiny of the goings-on at LCH.

I mentioned that the executives downgraded the risk rating of the serious sexual assault of a nurse. That was not a one-off: there were other instances in which they were willing to hide failure. The Capsticks report says:

“when risks were escalated upwards, they were either ignored or watered down by those in more senior positions to make them look less significant than they were, without any clear rationale for doing so.”

That included the suppression of a report into district nursing services because its findings were so catastrophic and told the truth. Having requested documents under freedom of information, I have evidence that the nursing director and clinical director signed off the CIP plan that states that they believed those plans to be clinically safe. All the evidence says that those plans were not safe at all.

In hiding their failures, the executives regularly deceived the non-exec directors, as the Capsticks report highlights:

“There were repeated failures by the Executive Directors to be open and transparent with the wider Board, which is ultimately responsible for the care and welfare of its staff. This included not sharing with the Board details of a serious assault carried out on a health care professional and not sharing with the Board the results of a survey of staff views and opinions undertaken by the Staff Side which amongst other things highlighted that 96% of respondents believed bullying was a moderate or worse problem at the Trust.”

The trust chair was present at staff side meetings.

The non-exec directors on the board are also culpable for their failings. The fact that the board was deceived by executive directors should not detract from the catalogue
of errors that the non-executives made in fulfilling their duties. Instead of providing the most basic challenge and oversight, the chair of the trust and her fellow non-executive directors were in denial. They were more concerned with protecting their reputation than with protecting patient safety and staff welfare. The chair was reported on many occasions, usually in response to me, as saying:

“The board has complete confidence in the chief executive and her team.”

What is so concerning is the directors’ sheer lack of awareness—never mind acceptance—that they had failed. Capsticks says that its “detailed review of the public minutes of Board meetings from 2011 until April 2014 do not show that Non-Executive Directors on the Board collectively and individually held the Executive Directors to account. Indeed our extensive review of these minutes shows little evidence of scrutiny and challenge.”

There was an over-reliance by the board on external consultancy reports for assurance on its performance—although ironically, the board ignored the finding of a 2012 report on governance by Deloitte that stated that “there was an inconsistent level of challenge from Non-Executive Directors on quality.”

They heard only what they wanted to hear.

Paragraph 9.36 of the Capsticks report states:

“The Board and its Committees for their part failed to understand the impact of such a significant Cost Improvement Programme on the quality and staffing of front line services and did not provide the required level of proactive oversight, too willing in our view to accept Executive Director assurance of a process which was largely at variance with that set out in national guidance.”

In paragraph 13.36 of its report, Capsticks comments that “the Board ignored one of key findings of the Francis Inquiry…which identified ‘an unhealthy and dangerous culture’ as a pervading cause of the failures at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust.”

Had any of the opportunities been taken, the subsequent sequence of failures could have been broken. The board could have done something. It should have done something. It did not, and patients and staff came to harm. I do not believe that the non-execs accept to this day their responsibility for the damage that they caused in failing the patients and staff at LCH.

Perhaps equally concerning for the Minister is that the extensive regulatory framework that exists, in the expectation of stopping events such as Mid-Staffs and now LCH, fell down on the job. Nurses who contacted the NMC were simply referred to protocols—although the NMC is currently engaged in resolving some of these issues. This was not the RCN and the other unions’ finest hour. Most absent of all were the NHS Trust Development Authority, which is now called NHS Improvement, and Liverpool and South Sefton clinical commissioning groups.

The clinical commissioning groups in particular have a duty—I quote from NHS England’s rules—to “make their own assessment of cost improvements and be satisfied that services are safe for patients with no reduction in quality.”

In the case of Liverpool clinical commissioning group, there is no evidence that LCH’s savings plans received even the most basic checks to ensure that they were safe and would not lead to patient and staff harm. For a clinical commissioning group that is responsible for almost £0.75 billion of NHS spending and the future reorganisation of health services in Liverpool, that dereliction of responsibility is deeply disturbing and must prompt the questions, “Is it up to the job?” and “Where else is its eye off the ball?”

The CQC’s previous assessments of the trust did not reveal the bullying or the seriousness of the situation, although after I contacted it, it did produce the first regulatory evidence that all was not well. It also protected the whistleblowers, for which I thank Ann Ford. The lack of any discernible action by the CQC four months after it received the Capsticks report is not good enough. The lack of accountability remains deeply troubling.

The Trust Development Authority in the end removed the chief executive, the executive nurse and the human resources director from their posts following a review by Sir Ian Carruthers. I was led to believe that because of the information that I had provided and the Carruthers review, those individuals had been sacked. That was untrue. The TDA also left the failing non-exec directors in place on the board, and that hindered the trust’s recovery. If the board was failing and the executives had to go, why leave half the board there to hinder the people brought in to make it better?

I am still astounded that I was told that the chief exec had been fired when the truth, elicited by freedom of information, says that she was given a reference and that Manchester mental health trust was asked to mentor her without being told about the full circumstances. Effectively, she had been moved from one job—because she was doing badly—to be mentored at Manchester mental health trust. Currently, she remains safely holed-up in a senior executive role at Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, still earning about £106,000. I am told by the Care Quality Commission that her flight across the borders within the United Kingdom prevents it from taking any action.

Gary Andrews, the former director of finance and non-clinical clinical governance lead, has been given a senior managerial role in NHS England’s vanguard programme. Craig Gradden, LCH’s former medical director, is employed as a medical consultant in Sefton. Helen Lockett, Liverpool Community Health’s former director of nursing, who I was told had been sacked, got a £25,000 pay-off and a reference. Only the 18-month interim order issued by the NMC while she is under investigation stops her practising. Who referred her to the NMC? Was it the system? No, it was me.

Michelle Porteous, the HR director, was allowed to leave unchallenged and was seen to spend her last days at the shredding machine—no one stopped her. Although outside the remit of the NHS and its regulators, the former chair of the trust continues to work with the health service through her management of a charitable company called Health@Work, which sells health and safety advice, training in emotional intelligence, spotting signs and symptoms of poor mental health in staff members and techniques to manage stress. I will say no more.

The Prime Minister said he did not want failures recycled around the NHS, but here we have a regulator doing just that: not investigating, not disciplining and not taking the appropriate sanction, just recycling. Accountability and the interests of patients and NHS staff require action, so I ask the Minister whether the fit
and proper person test, introduced to prevent NHS leaders responsible for serious mismanagement from assuming similar roles in the NHS, is fit for the job.

Before I come to my last point, it would be remiss of me not to mention the progress that has been made by LCH in the two years since April 2014. The trust has turned a corner through investment in safe staffing levels, a new approach that values clinical leadership, clear action to put quality and patient safety first and a new culture of openness and honesty. To have come so far in such a relatively short period of time is a credit to the frontline staff in LCH and the new leadership it has been given.

Most importantly, while the Capsticks review has shone a light into the dark recesses of the goings on at Liverpool Community Health in those four terrible years before the system acted, it does not, and cannot, document all the harm caused to patients. The Capsticks report finds that it is reasonable to conclude that between 2010 and 2014, patients received sub-optimal care. It is therefore a sad and undeniable fact that there will be people on Merseyside today who have lost loved ones, or seen them suffer, or suffered themselves, who do not know that their anguish was avoidable and caused by the failures of leadership at the trust.

In the interests of truth and justice, we cannot allow that to continue. I therefore look to the Minister for assurances that preferably a public inquiry, and at least an independent clinical review, into patient harm associated with the leadership failings at Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust between 2010 and 2014 will be conducted without further delay and that nothing is hidden. It must be made public. I am very aware that very senior people are really angry that this is coming out.

I also ask the Minister to include, as part of any review, an independent investigation into the adequacy of the actions taken at the same time by NHS Improvement—TDA as it was—NHS England, Liverpool CCG, South Sefton CCG, Southport and Formby CCG and their predecessor organisations to assess and address safety concerns at LCH. That needs to reflect the health system’s future challenges, where accountability and governance will not just affect one organisation but a whole region, area or system. It is only through that course of action that we can provide the assurances necessary to those harmed that that will never be allowed happen again.

In finishing, I ask the Minister—obviously not today—to look at the TDA assessment programme for the break-up of LCH because, for example, Bridgewater, a trust that does not have a CQC rating, is pitching for LCH business against other organisations that do have CQC ratings. That is patently unfair. Also, in the private sector we would not allow a business to poach former members of staff—it is almost insider trading—but that clearly is going on in this process. We must establish whether former members of staff declare their conflict of interest and whether we are protecting NHS organisations from that kind of insider trading.

I am sure that the Minister is aware of how deeply angry and upsetting this is, not just for me—having spent three years looking at it and working hard at it—but for each and every single member of staff who, right now, trusts him to deliver. They were too frightened to go to their execs and they were let down by the system. They were not sure that they could whistleblow in safety—that is why I did it. The system has let people down so badly. No one has been hurt because I did what I did in that way, but that is not right, and we need to be able to speak freely on behalf of their organisations, their patients and their staff. This is not 21st century health politics.

5.7 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Unfortunately, this has been a repeating story since Bristol Royal Infirmary in the mid-’90s when Stephen Bolsin, the anaesthetist who raised that issue of poor survival of children having cardiac surgery, ended up in Australia. That has been a repeating theme. Regardless of the GMC telling us that it is our duty to step forward, whoever steps forward is always the one who is suspended or loses their job or suffers detriment in some way.

There are a lot of common themes when we look at Morecambe Bay, Mid Staffs and this case. In some of them, there has been the issue of trying to obtain trust status and going for cost savings. As the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) said, we have management chasing one goal while staff should be chasing a different goal: clinical quality. We see the stories of bullying and gagging and we see a coalface under pressure, with things going wrong and, if someone whistleblows, inevitably we hear of detriment: destruction to their reputation and perhaps loss of their job.

In an ideal situation we would rarely ever need to have a whistleblower. We need clinical audit, which audits not just the money but the quality of performance to give quality assurance. At one time here in England we had the Commission for Health Improvement, but that was got rid of in 2004. When NHS Improvement came out, I thought that was like what we have in Scotland, which is called Healthcare Improvement Scotland, which we have had under one name or another since 2000. However, NHS Improvement just looks at the money, so we still have this business that the money is trumping the quality assurance.

That audit needs to be seen and problems need to be put right as soon as they are reported. Complaints should be seen as something that are used and looked at in every directorate meeting, which is something we do locally in my trust. Datix, which is used north and south of the border, is a way of trying to lower that barrier and to get people used to reporting every routine misstep, whether minor or major, bringing down the barriers to doing that and getting rid of any sense of hierarchy.

From our patient safety initiative in Scotland, we do things like using first names in theatre to try to get rid of that “fear of the prof” or fear of the consultant, so that an orderly who notices something going wrong feels able to speak up and say, “That is the wrong leg. I think we should check the paperwork again.” Once we get into a situation of having things going wrong, we need to enable any member of the team to easily draw attention to it. Traditional in surgery—this will be UK-wide—are morbidity and mortality meetings in which the whole unit will review any death or significant morbidity. That does not tend to exist in other specialties but it ought to—we ought to have it for every stillbirth and for deaths in other specialties. Maybe then we would know exactly how many deaths or major detriments
were avoidable. That cannot be done with stats—we have to look at the cases. One of the things I set up in my unit was something we called, to make it easier for everyone, the difficult case review. Any team member—it did not matter who—could put a name in the book for the next difficult case meeting so that that case would be looked at.

Whistleblowers need internal support so they can go and not suffer detriment. We have had the Francis report and we have the freedom to speak up, and I commend the Government for setting up the national guardian system—we are doing something very similar—but what comes back from whistleblowers I meet is they are concerned that the person who has been appointed is an NHS manager. We have to have someone who is utterly outside the system. Most of all, we need to change the culture that is close to the frontline. Management must have clinical governance responsibility, not just financial governance responsibility, so that staff get used to raising issues that are then dealt with, learned from and changed, and that management see that as part of their role.

5.12 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), who has ploughed what has at times been a very lonely furrow on this issue. She has shown incredible tenacity in pursuing the matter over a number of years. What makes this all the more remarkable is that, despite all of the inspection regimes and safeguards in place, the only reason we are debating this is because she had the courage and the determination to pursue these issues. She made a powerful and lengthy contribution today; I do not use that adjective in a critical way, but to highlight that there is so much that needs to be considered. The debate is certainly not going to be the end of the story. My contribution will perhaps not be as lengthy as on other occasions as I would like to give the Minister as much time as possible to set out how he intends to take matters forward.

At the heart of this is a random occurrence—my hon. Friend attending the trust in question as a result of her mother being a patient there—and one can only wonder whether anything would have been done about the situation had she not attended, and had the brave staff on the ward not approached her after that. We heard from her about a whole catalogue of incidents, any of which in isolation ought to have raised alarm bells. When she spoke of the picture across the board, the number of grievances, some taking years to resolved, the suspensions that seem to be used as a punishment rather than the neutral act they are meant to be and the number of complaints of bullying and harassment it is clear that a wider pattern was there. In the words of the report:

“Non-Executive Directors took reassurance too easily and failed to provide sufficient scrutiny and challenge across a number of key areas. They collectively represented a series of missed opportunities to intervene.”

It should be said that there were also repeated failures by the executive directors to be open and transparent with the wider board, which included them not divulging details of a serious assault carried out on a staff member and keeping from the board the results of a staff survey that said 96% of respondents believed bullying was a problem to some degree within the trust. Will the Minister address whether he considers there needs to be more training or support for non-executive directors, so they at least know when they are not getting the whole picture? I also wonder whether there ought to be a requirement for at least one employee representative on each board so that, if there is a culture like this, there is a greater chance of it being revealed. What steps are being taken to prevent those non-executive directors who were involved in this from serving in a similar capacity in future?

The position of the executive directors deserves much sharper criticism, particularly when, as my hon. Friend pointed out, many of the senior people involved have found themselves in employment elsewhere in the NHS, and she quite rightly asked where the individual accountability is. Staff spending their last few days stood at a shredding machine is the sort of thing that goes on in multinational companies that have been cooking the books. It is not what should be happening in an open, transparent and accountable public body. It seems that the human resources team were used as a tool to enforce management’s will rather than to ensure the rules were applied fairly and consistently across the board. It is little wonder in those circumstances that staff did not feel confident that they could raise concerns freely.

I am sure we will talk about the duty of candour, but will the Minister give us assurances that this sort of situation will not happen again? Policies and good intentions can only take us so far, particularly when a culture develops that positively attacks those that raise concerns so that everyone is too frightened to raise those concerns in the first place. In my experience I have seen far too many times people who have legitimate concerns about a practice at their place of work but who do not have the confidence to raise those issues without fear of reprisal. A policy is only as good as the people entrusted to honour it and that is down to the people at the top. They set the tone and they have a duty to ensure that every person who raises a legitimate concern is protected. It only takes one bad experience or one failure to act in good faith on a concern raised and the entire system falls into disrepute.

I am sure that nobody goes into public service with the intention of creating such a culture of fear but it is clear that good intentions can be diverted by other influences and pressures. In this case, the central conclusion in the report, which needs more careful consideration, is that when the trust made the decision to go for foundation status what happened was an “accompanying focus to reduce costs, which resulted in enormous pressures on many front line services and the emergence of a culture of bullying and harassment of staff at various levels within the organisation and the delivery to some patients of poor and in some cases sub-standard care.”

The report also said:

“For many of these concerns, it is hard to come to any other conclusion than that they were managed in the way they were in order to ensure the Trust application for NHS foundation trust status remained on track.”

That is pretty damning.
Aside from the financial pressures faced, we know that other pressures on staff are not going away, with significant numbers reporting work-related stress. We know that vacancy rates and rota gaps are unacceptably high and there are serious problems with staff morale across a whole range of services. I pay tribute to all NHS staff who are working hard in very trying circumstances, but we should also be realistic about the challenges they face. The staff at the trust have been key to delivering the improvements we have already seen, and the latest CQC report recognises that there have been improvements, which is not only a credit to those staff but also to the new leadership team.

It is fair to say that there is clearly still some way to go. For example, the performance of paediatric speech therapy service was worse than at the last inspection to the extent that the trust had to suspend the waiting list for a year. It was also noted that, despite some improvements, too many patients are developing serious pressure ulcers, which is something that ought to be eradicated altogether. Inspectors also highlighted “significant improvements” in the culture of the organisation and praised the trust for the measures it has introduced to keep staff safe, which is clearly one of the biggest and most important changes that was needed.

Whether that change in culture is permanent can only be tested by events, but we should reinforce at every opportunity the importance of speaking out with confidence. In that regard, it appears the future of the national whistleblowing helpline is still being considered. I would like to see the local guardians as complimentary to, rather than a replacement for, the national helpline. I would be grateful if the Minister will address whether any decision has yet been taken on the future of that national helpline.

In conclusion, I add my voice to the calls made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire for an independent clinical review into patient harm associated with the leadership failings at the trust. We also need an investigation into the adequacy of the actions taken at the same time by NHS Improvement, NHS England, the clinical commissioning groups and their predecessor organisations. Only then can we move into a position from which we can confidently say this is something that will never happen again.

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): It is a great pleasure to respond to this debate that you are chairing, Mrs Main. I echo the compliments paid by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) for the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper).

The hon. Lady has been very brave in pursuing this cause, which she has taken up on behalf of her constituents. I agree that it is striking that this matter would not have come to the fore had she not had very sad and unfortunate personal experience of the failure of care at Liverpool Community Health. I thank her for her persistence in the face of opposition, not just from the usual quarters but from places that might not have been considered to be inimical to a Labour party Member. That is why I particularly commend her for what she has done and for continuing to fight the cause for her constituents. It is absolutely true that as a result of what she has taken up on their behalf, the care being provided is now safer than it would otherwise have been. Sometimes we need to remind ourselves that doing this job is worth while, and she has done that in great measure for herself and other Members of Parliament. I hope completely fair, we would have been 10 years before that. We are on a journey, and I appreciate the collegiate atmosphere that has been created in this debate and elsewhere.

I will answer the specific points and questions, because I do not want to reiterate the excellent exposition given by the hon. Member for West Lancashire. She asks who polices HR departments. The simple answer is that the Care Quality Commission, in its well led domain, as it looks at organisations will continue to look at the quality of leadership within an organisation. I will talk in a second about the kinds of thing that I think it should be looking for in the new round of inspections that it will begin in due course.

The hon. Lady asks about the fit and proper persons test. As it is currently constructed, it is for boards to be judging people by the fit and proper persons test. That is the way I think it should be, and there is consensus on that, but clearly those boards need to be properly constituted and know what they are doing. I think that that gets to the crux of what she is saying.

To answer the point made by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston about training for non-executive directors, that is, funnily enough, something we are actively looking at to try to improve the quality of boards precisely so that they can ask the questions that are needed, not just in terms of a fit and proper persons test but in order to hold their executive directors fully to account.

The hon. Member for West Lancashire asks about the need for a review, and I know that that is the main purpose of bringing this matter to the attention of the House. I have commissioned NHS Improvement to do a review or at least to ensure that a review happens. As she will be aware, there has been some discussion about the terms of reference for that. I know that Jim Mackey has talked to her about it; she is in communication with him. I, too, am in communication with Jim and I hope that in the course of the next few weeks I or my successor will ensure that that review is as robust as it needs to be. The hon. Lady knows my view on that, which is that I do not want something excessively expensive and excessively long, because that will serve no one's
[Ben Gummer]

interests. We need to get the balance right, so that it is timely and good value for money and we are not taking money out of the NHS that would be better spent on her constituents’ care. If we can get to the root cause of these problems in a timely and efficient manner, that will serve her and her constituents well. I commit myself to ensuring that that happens quickly.

The hon. Lady asks about conflicts of interest. As it happens, NHS England is looking at precisely that at the moment. It is an area that we need to be much better in. However, I hope that as we see an evolving NHS, which is far more about collaborative working than the purist approach to competition that was the drive under the original foundation trust mechanism set up in the early 2000s, it will be less of a problem than she correctly anticipates it might be in this instance.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) makes a number of important observations about her experience in Scotland, but I am afraid she is wrong on two points. NHS Improvement is not just interested in money; it is very firmly an improvement agency that deals with quality as well as financial performance. She will know that the two do go hand in hand. The best run trusts tend to be those that look after their money as well as their patients. We can see that relationship in the CQC inspections and their relationship with deficits. I suggest that she speak to the director of quality in NHS Improvement, Dr Mike Durkin, who was moved across from NHS England precisely so that NHS Improvement could become a true quality organisation. I am sure she will know him from the past. He is a globally respected expert in the issues of quality and institutional learning.

The hon. Lady is also wrong to say that the national guardian was an NHS manager. She is one of the leading chief nurses in the NHS, and I am sad that she felt unable to continue with that role. The hon. Lady will be pleased to know that her replacement, Dr Henrietta Hughes, is also a clinician—a practising general practitioner. It is very important that we give the right message to whistleblowers, and that is as much the case in Westminster Hall as it is outside in the public space.

Dr Philippa Whitford: The feedback that I have had from whistleblowers is that they see the new replacement national guardian as someone who is in an NHS manager role, and they feel that that is not sufficiently independent for the national guardian for whistleblowers. They are talking about the new guardian.

Ben Gummer: The new guardian is a practising GP and her office is deliberately set aside from the Department of Health; it is not part of our structures. The purpose of that is to ensure that the person is independent. I hope that that will give confidence to whistleblowers. I have asked her to make a decision on the helpline, because it is important that she makes that decision, not I, in the future.

Finally, I come to the questions asked by the shadow Minister. He talks about FT status. Much was right about the drive for foundation trusts, but a lot of things went wrong. We saw that at Mid Staffs and we have certainly seen it in this instance. I think that he will have noticed a far more considered approach to the FT pipeline in the past few years than previously. I know from experience of my own hospital, which failed to get FT status but is now a very good hospital, that the two do not necessarily correspond.

In all of this, we have to strike an important balance whereby we ensure that hospitals are performing while spending public money properly. The best hospitals and community care organisations do that by energising their staff, eradicating bullying and harassment and ensuring that people are free to speak up and exercise the duty of candour. That is why the thrust from the Department in the past 18 months to two years has been about living the values of the Francis inquiry. We have been putting that into practice in terms of the duty of candour, the whistleblowing apparatus that we have set up, and freedom to speak up.

We are at the beginning of a long journey. There is much to do to make the NHS the world’s largest learning organisation, but we have begun that process. I hope that the report that comes out—the further clinical review for the hon. Member for West Lancashire and her constituents—will be a further step on that journey, not just to correct and expose the failings in her area, but to ensure that the system as a whole, including the Department of Health, learns from them so that they are not repeated elsewhere and we continue to make the NHS the best healthcare organisation in the world.

5.29 pm

Rosie Cooper: May I quickly thank the Minister for his genuine, honest approach? But hearts were dropping—I have been getting texts—during his response about the CQC and HR. All they can do is require improvement—that does not stop this and does not change it. The TDA was supposed to look after boards and it did not spot this failing board.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Thursday 14 July 2016

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Co-operatives

1.30 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution of cooperatives to the economy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased to be here with colleagues from across the House, and with many fellow members of the Co-operative party, to discuss this important issue. I stand here not only as a member of the Labour party but as a Co-operative MP, along with many other colleagues here. I am pleased to work with colleagues across the legislatures, councils and different political institutions of the United Kingdom to stand up for co-operative values and the co-operative ideal in our politics, which enjoy support even from non-Co-op members. I am glad to see representatives from other parties here, and I am sure that they will make some excellent contributions. There are 25 Co-op MPs, 1,500 councillors, three police and crime commissioners, eight Members of the Scottish Parliament and 11 Assembly Members, but many others also share our ideals and interests.

Members may be aware that the timing of this debate is no coincidence. We recently celebrated Co-operatives fortnight, which ran from 18 June to 2 July. Co-operatives fortnight brings great attention to the issues every year, as do numerous other events throughout the country and indeed around the world. Co-operatives fortnight is a time when co-operatives up and down the country remind people of the many good reasons why we should all choose the co-operative model and of the significant impact that co-operatives have had for many years and continue to have on the British economy.

That is important to recognise, as we are going through difficult times both politically and for business and the economy. Unfortunately, as always, the difficult cases and mistakes made by some businesses tend to predominate. The BHS crisis, the scandals involving non-payment of tax and lots of other issues have dominated the business and economic agenda in recent months but, overall, we should be proud of the success story that surrounds the role of co-operatives and mutuals in our economy. That is what I wish to draw attention to in my remarks.

The movement has seen incredible growth over the past number of years. The number of people who own and control the UK’s co-operatives has grown by more than 10% to 17.5 million, nearly a quarter of the UK population, meaning that the number of co-operative members continues to outstrip the number of regular shareholders in the UK. The sector is set to benefit further from the recent Co-op Group announcement that it wants to add 1 million new members over the next five years. It is important to make it clear that, although the Co-op Group tends to dominate the news that we hear about the co-op sector in the UK, it is not the whole sector. The sector is much wider, more diverse and more extensive than just its most well-known brand name.

Overall, the co-op sector has grown by £3.5 billion over the last five years. That growth is accounted for by a combination of success among retailers such as John Lewis, the Midcounties Co-operative and the Central England Co-operative, and steady growth in the agricultural sector. It is worth noting some of the largest sectors within the co-operative economy by number of co-operatives and turnover: agriculture, which has 416 co-ops with a turnover of more than £5.8 million; retail, which has 505 co-ops with a turnover of £24.3 million; sports and leisure, which has 2,890 co-ops; and health and social care, which has 88 co-operatives and a very large turnover.

That is matched by more than 225,000 jobs created in the co-operative economy throughout the length and breadth of the UK. We should applaud and welcome that, recognising that many of those jobs are in thriving businesses that provide a huge role for employees as well as co-op members. They often offer excellent pay, conditions and involvement in the direction of where the co-operative goes, not just the employer/employee relationship of many traditional businesses.

Co-operatives and mutual societies play a pivotal societal, social and economic role throughout the UK. They are created, governed and run by members, and set up by members for members. The idea of membership-led engagement is the distinguishing element that makes co-operatives and mutual societies different from other legal entities, and it is unique as far as participation in economic life is concerned. It is important to recognise that because a mutual society is created and managed to fulfil its members’ needs, it inherently pursues long-term goals. That pursuit of long-term goals marks mutants as reliable, stable and durable elements in many sectors of the economy.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I know that my hon. Friend was a strong supporter of the Co-op party’s successful campaign during the last Parliament for the Government to establish a military credit union to help protect our military personnel and their families from being exploited by payday lenders. Does he think that this debate might be a good opportunity to hear from the Minister about what progress there has been in terms of people joining the three credit unions established to help military personnel?

Stephen Doughty: That is a crucial point. My hon. Friend, who has been a leader on the co-operative ideal in this Parliament, across the country and within the Co-operative party itself, led the campaign for a military credit union. I would certainly be interested to hear from the Minister about that. As a member of a credit union myself—Cardiff and Vale Credit Union—I know that many Co-operative supporters also belong to and promote credit unions in their communities. I also recognise that fair lending and fair access to finance can help different sectors: particularly, as my hon. Friend pointed out, veterans and those serving in our armed forces. It is crucial that they do not fall prey to the payday lenders who create such a problem in our economy.
We have seen progress not only in fair lending but in fair tax, an issue on which the co-operative movement has shown leadership. It is worth noting, and the House will be interested to know, that Britain’s top five co-ops pay more UK tax than Amazon, Facebook, Apple, eBay and Starbucks combined. That is very much in line with where the public stand. Only 34% of the British public believe that most big businesses in the UK pay their fair share of tax, and, sadly, just 6% trust a company of any size to provide accurate information on the tax that it has paid. Recent research undertaken by KPMG shows that trust in companies’ approach to tax is the fourth most significant factor in how much overall trust an individual places in a company or brand.

The Fair Tax Mark campaign has been established to set a new standard in responsible tax practice, from the smallest shop to the biggest multinational. The pioneers of the campaign have, as we would expect, been co-ops and social enterprises. From the beginning, the Co-operative party, Co-operatives UK and Social Enterprise UK have been highly supportive of the fair tax mark. I am proud to say that the Co-operative party is the first political party to achieve the fair tax mark. It is clear and evident that co-operatives have seized the opportunity to benefit from the public’s willingness to punish tax avoiders.

The co-op movement’s enthusiasm for adopting fair tax policies further demonstrates that the co-operative model is an inherently social and responsible form of business. I would certainly be interested to hear from the Minister what lessons he thinks there are for the rest of the economy in the example being set by co-operatives and those leading the Fair Tax Mark campaign. Achieving the mark certifies that a company is making a genuine effort to be open and transparent about its tax affairs and pays the right amount of corporation tax at the right time and in the right place. I am proud of the work done on that.

Co-operatives clearly provide new and innovative solutions to some of the other challenges of our changing economy, one of which is the growing number of self-employed workers. There are now more self-employed workers than at any time since modern records began. Some 4.6 million people, around 15% of the workforce, are now self-employed. Data from the Office for National Statistics show that two thirds of new jobs created in the UK pay their fair share of tax, and, that legislative and other changes can have on the additional pressures and the disproportionate impact that self-employed are often not highlighted enough in

With that in mind, it is particularly interesting to note that throughout the country freelancers and self-employed people are coming together to form co-operatives for shared services, in some cases with support from entrepreneurial trade unions that see the opportunity to support members who are self-employed, not just those who are employed in traditional workplace arrangements in larger businesses.

I have some interesting examples. In Wales, the Oren Actors Management co-op allows actors to work between roles as agents for other co-op member actors, marketing their services—a two-way process in which they mutually support one another. That is a very good example of co-operative principles in practice. In Swindon, 50 music teachers have come together to form a co-op to market their services to schools with support from the Musicians Union, with which I enjoy a proud association—indeed, I should state for the record that my register of interests shows that I have enjoyed support from it in the past. The Musicians Union does an excellent job in that respect and I am very excited to see it working to help self-employed music teachers. In London, interpreters came together in a co-op in November 2012 after changes in their terms and conditions when the firm Capita took on the contract to provide interpretation services in judicial courts. I do not want to get into a lengthy debate about Capita and its good and bad aspects, but that is a fascinating situation of a co-op of interpreters coming together.

Compared with practice in some countries overseas, these initiatives are only in their infancy. They have potential to grow tremendously, like other models witnessed in other parts of the world. I am certainly interested in whether the Minister thinks we could play a bigger role in promoting best practice and supporting such initiatives from other countries. In the United States, for example, Freelancers Union, which was formed for the self-employed, has attracted over 280,000 members. In the Netherlands and Spain, general unions for self-employed workers have emerged and developed since the late 1990s and provide a range of services as well as representation. The Assemblée Nationale in the French Parliament has also introduced legislation, which came into force this January, to recognise the role of 72 business and employment co-operatives, supporting members with accounting and access to the sickness pay and benefits of conventional employees.

It is worth highlighting that the Wales Co-operative Centre, another body with which I enjoy a close association—I work closely with its head, Derek Walker, locally—and Co-operatives UK have recently published the “Not Alone” report, which sets out some key findings on how the co-operative movement and trade unions can come together in the UK to build support for self-employed workers.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that recent legislation that erodes travel and subsistence benefits for freelancers and that affects their tax reporting will hinder our freelancers and those working in the environments he describes?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely agree. The challenges, the additional pressures and the disproportionate impact that legislative and other changes can have on the self-employed are often not highlighted enough in
but should. I know my colleagues in the National Assembly are driving this issue forward in the areas where Wales enjoys devolved responsibility. We often work closely together as Co-operative MPs and Assembly Members to address those issues and to ensure that we are doing what we can, both here in Westminster and in Wales. I am sure that is also the case elsewhere with our many councillors throughout the country.

I know other Members wish to make contributions—I am looking forward to hearing them. I believe that co-operatives are a great and important example of how people can come together to help each other. They are also a great example of self-reliance, which we should continue to support and celebrate. Co-operatives have brought about trust and a sense of values and ethics that we sometimes do not see in other parts of economy but, crucially, this is not about some slightly odd, unusual or marginal part of the economy. Co-operatives are a growing, vibrant and dynamic sector, creating jobs, delivering growth and providing opportunities in areas and sectors of the economy that are simply not being provided by other forms of business model. I hope the co-operative sector continues to grow and to have the support it needs from all levels of government in the UK to go forward in the years ahead.

Several hon. Members rose——

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate is due to finish at 3 pm; the guideline limits for the Front Bench speeches, assuming that Front-Bench personnel are the same at the end of the debate as they were at the beginning, are 10 minutes for the Scottish National party, 10 minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Government. I shall call Front-Bench Members no later than 2.28 pm; even though I am a bear of little brain, I can see that that gives us 40 minutes, with seven Members standing. I shall not impose a time limit, because this is a debate about co-operatives. This is a test for all seven Members to share the time equally between themselves—otherwise, the last Member will not get to speak. I am putting the clock on to give you a guideline. Please make sure that everybody gets in. At the end, Stephen Doughty will have the chance for a two-minute wind-up.

1.49 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): You are a rock of stability on this turbulent day, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased to see that my hon. Friend the Minister is still in his post; I hope he is still there later.

“Society is co-operation; it is community in action”.

That is a pithy line from my favourite economist, and one of the most free-market writers. It not only encapsulates the essence of this debate but gives a key insight into the market economy. In a market economy, people should co-operate with one another to serve each other’s needs. It should not be a selfish process, even when it is competitive. It should be a process of service to other people. That plays into the recent speech by my right lion. Friend the Prime Minister. She has articulated clearly a sentiment that has come out of the EU referendum: the global economy is not working for ordinary, normal working people. Co-operatives can play a crucial role in reforming the institutions of the market economy, so that it works better for those people.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman support the work of the Wales TUC and the Wales Co-operative Centre, which is dealing with some of the challenges he describes in the labour market, including middle-aged unemployment, school drop-out rates and increasing youth employment?

Stephen Doughty: Absolutely. As the hon. Gentleman rightly mentions, there is a strong link between the Wales Co-operative Centre and the Wales TUC, and indeed with other trade unions in Wales. It is that type of partnership and co-operation between those who share common aims and values that is driving forward some of these agendas that do not get a lot of attention this House; they can have a much bigger impact than they would have on a larger company, for example. We need to do all we can about that, and the co-operative movement is clearly playing an innovative and key role in trying to address those changes. The interests of self-employed workers are not well represented in our policy making, with the result that they face unnecessary regulatory burdens and barriers. I am proud that the co-operative movement is championing our self-employed, who make such an invaluable contribution to our economy and represent such a growing proportion of our labour market.

As a Welsh Labour and Co-operative MP, I want to highlight some of the work that is going on in Wales and the contribution that co-ops make to the Welsh economy. In 2015, the Wales Co-operative Centre launched its report on social businesses in Wales. That report outlined the scope and scale of the sector, its performance and the many opportunities for further development.

The term “social businesses” includes social enterprises, co-operatives, mutuals and other employee-owned businesses. We have seen the statistics for co-operatives’ contribution to the UK economy as a whole; the report found that the total value of the social business sector in Wales is £1.7 billion and that it employs over 38,000 people. Social businesses tend to be more active in deprived areas than other small and medium-sized enterprises and to employ and procure locally, which suggests that they make an important economic contribution—perhaps a disproportionate contribution—in some of the poorest areas of the country.

Social businesses are a robust and dynamic sector, confident about the future. Indeed, 69% of social businesses in Wales expect turnover to increase in the next two to three years. Women are also keenly represented in leadership positions, with 35% of social businesses reporting a majority of women in leadership roles, compared with 19% of SMEs. Women’s leadership in business and the corporate sector is often discussed in this House, but here again we see the co-operative sector leading the way in putting principles into practice and ensuring that women are occupying a majority of roles. Some of the larger corporates and businesses in this country would do well to learn from that example of the benefits that larger corporates and businesses in this country would do well to learn from that example of the benefits that would have on a larger company, for example. We often work closely together as Co-operative MPs and Assembly Members to address those issues and to ensure that we are doing what we can, both here in Westminster and in Wales. I am sure that is also the case elsewhere with our many councillors throughout the country.

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Our great challenge is to remake the institutions of a market economy, not to abolish them, whatever some may say. The only way to co-ordinate our economy and society is through the price system, which is why co-operatives are so important. The former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr Cameron), promised us a co-operatives Bill some years ago. Indeed, the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act became law in 2014. I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will not mind my saying that unfortunately it was something of a disappointment, because it was only a consolidation Bill, so as it passed through Parliament it was not possible to consider, debate or amend it. We could have perhaps innovated on co-operatives.

I refer the Government to “The Co-operative Advantage”, a book edited by Ed Mayo of Co-operatives UK. It lists the areas in which co-operatives are being applied, to great social benefit: agriculture, community food, renewable energy, retail, insurance, banking, creative industries, sport, tourism, education, social care, health, housing, criminal justice and transport. There is huge scope in our lives and society to advance co-operatives, to general benefit. Indeed, one of the most inspiring people I met in the previous Parliament was a young woman working as a careworker for an employee-owned co-operative. She spoke about issues of employee engagement, capital, administration and accounting as vibrantly as a venture capitalist might. She was fully engaged in what she was doing. More than that, the users of her service, as participants in the ownership of the service they used, were also fully engaged.

In deference to the Opposition Members who want to speak, I shall curtail my remarks and not talk about the particular advantages of employee ownership. This Parliament has almost four years left to run. Knowing that the Prime Minister intends to adjust the institutions of the market economy to make it work better for normal working people, I very much hope that we can do a little better than a consolidation Bill in this Parliament.

1.52 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I declare an interest as a proud member of the Co-operative party, the sister party to the Labour party. I am one of the 25 Labour and Co-operative MPs.

I am proud to be taking part in this timely debate on the contribution of co-operatives to our economy. For me, a co-op is about more than a collection of shops and companies and enterprises, brilliant though they are. For me, co-operation is a sign that there is a better world possible than the one delivered by pure free market and small-state ideology, and a better way to deliver social justice than overarching Government and state control.

Co-operation is about three things. First, it is about the best instincts of decent people: the desire to work together, play together and get along with one another. It is about the human instinct to band together, co-operate with one another and offer selfless, mutual support—proof that we achieve more together than we do alone.

Secondly, co-operation is an international creed. The co-operative movement is a truly international movement, because the values of decency apply across the continents, no matter which country one comes from.

Thirdly, the co-op has a celebrated history, but it is really all about the future. We know the story of the Rochdale pioneers who, all those years ago, started the first co-operative, but when it comes to the challenges of tomorrow—tackling global poverty, helping the poorest nations to build their economies and meeting the challenge of climate change—it is the co-operative ideal that best equips us to succeed.

When I look at a co-op, I see a glimpse of the future and get a sense of what might be. In so many ways, the co-operative movement prefigures the kind of society that I want to see: democratic, equal, fair, just, accessible to all and owned by everyone. That is especially true in the current economic climate. The economic impact of Brexit is just starting to be felt and there are very uncertain times ahead. There are big changes coming down the line, and there is fear—certainly in my constituency—that employers might move to Dublin, Frankfurt or Madrid. To survive Brexit, we will need new trading arrangements, access to new markets and new firms to fill the gaps. That is where the co-op and mutual sector, with its emphasis on fair trade and trade justice, can step in.

We wait to see what a Government led by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) will bring. I hope she will maintain all the workers’ rights that are currently guaranteed by the EU. Again, the co-operative and mutual ideal can be made to work for workers who are self-employed or in small firms. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), freelancers in particular can form co-operatives to protect themselves. An exciting and important example is how the Musicians Union has worked with and supported 50 music teachers in Cardiff. I hope we will see more such cases.

Co-ops can provide greater stability and support in a post-Brexit world of insecurity and risk. It is a real shame, and a missed opportunity, that both the coalition Government and, more recently, the Tory Government have paid so little attention to co-ops. We have come a long way since the days of the Conservative Co-operative Movement—one of the more audacious pieces of repositioning by the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr Cameron). The Conservative-led coalition was no friend to the co-op movement. Between 2010 and 2015, Ministers withdrew support for solar renewable energy co-operatives, forcing many to close down; took funding away from the co-operative schools project, which was making a real difference for many schools throughout the country; and shelved plans for more co-operative Sure Start centres and housing trusts. I am a passionate believer in education about alternative models of ownership. In too many schools throughout the country, from primary right through to secondary, young people are not learning about the co-operative and mutual alternative.

What about the current Government? It will be interesting to hear what the Minister has to say, but their record could be better. I welcome the new Prime Minister’s announcement that she intends to put employee representatives on company boards—a policy advocated by the Co-operative party. I sincerely hope that a workable
scheme is brought forward that we can all get behind. I wonder what the new Prime Minister and the Minister will make of the other policies that we co-operators have been championing. They include having a proper scheme whereby all businesses with more than 50 employees are obliged to set up a profit-sharing scheme with their staff, with a minimum profit share pot set aside based on a calculation of annual profits. We know from the Office for National Statistics that approximately 36,000 companies would be in that bracket, affecting 12.9 million people. That would make a massive difference.

We co-operators want to introduce a duty to involve, with employees given a formal role in making decisions about how a company is run through works councils. The Co-operative party is calling for all publicly listed companies to have a duty to involve their employees. We want tax incentives for employee ownership. As it stands, the Government spend £615 million every year on tax incentives for employee ownership, but that is poorly targeted towards individual shareholdings and the remuneration of senior executives. That could be refashioned to ensure that all employees benefit.

We also want tax incentives for community energy. What could be better or more important than allowing communities to create energy and own it themselves? That would not only reduce our reliance on carbon sources and do more to meet our renewables target, but ensure that all the people in a community could own their own energy. Over the past two years, the Government have radically changed the regulatory environment for community renewable energy schemes and withdrawn tax incentives that encouraged community investment in those schemes. I sincerely hope that they will revisit that decision.

Tax incentives should also be used to ensure that sports clubs that meet stringent criteria for fan involvement and engagement can secure special tax status. If we reflect on the recent Euro 2016 championships, it is notable that many of the star players play for co-operative clubs such as FC Barcelona, Real Madrid and Bayern Munich. Indeed, in Germany, 33 out of 36 clubs in the Bundesliga are co-ops. As the new Prime Minister formulates her plans for Britain post-Brexit, I hope that she will look to the co-op and mutual model for ideas.

I am grateful to the House of Commons Library for putting together a really extensive list of all the different co-ops in my local area, including the Lodge Lane and District Credit Union in my own constituency, which I am proud to be a member of. However, the list did not include a new co-op, a café that is going to be situated on a road that goes through my constituency. I wish that co-op every success.

Co-ops and mutuals are about the future, not the past. I am proud to call myself a co-operator, and I will continue to campaign to ensure that we see more co-operatives and mutuals flourishing. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to the debate.

2 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I note that, as yet, you have not received your phone call to go to No. 10. Good luck with that.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate and on his excellent speech. I have always been a supporter of different ownership models within the economic sector, including co-operatives. Co-operatives should be encouraged. Furthermore, a clear indication of the co-operative model is when co-operatives work with the trade union movement. That should not come as any surprise to us, because the key goals of the trade union movement and the co-operative movement are very similar. They have mutual aims and deal with shared challenges in areas such as employment, innovation, education, lifelong learning for working people, social inclusion, equality and looking after our environment.

It comes as no surprise to me to learn that workers in co-operatives have good working conditions and that co-operatives act in the interests of workers’ experience and ensure that workers have strong labour rights. There is dialogue with workers, who are kept involved; co-operatives ensure that workers participate in decision making. As I have said, co-ops and unions share similar historic roots and common values and aims, including the social and economic wellbeing of the community and the promotion of economic sustainability and social innovation.

Of course, that work includes democratising the economy and making sure that there is a fair distribution of resources, because the economy cannot just be left to multinational companies, which do not often follow the aims of the co-operative movement.

There is high trade union membership in the co-operative movement. Therefore, workers are paid more in the co-operative economy than they are elsewhere; they have better contracts, such as open-ended employment contracts; and there is a low level of conflict between those working in the co-operative sector and those in management.

Job creation and protection is a key driver of joint work between the trade union movement and co-operatives. There is participation in co-operatives even in the building sector. I welcomed the dialogue in 2012 between Co-operatives UK and the TUC, which have a common agenda, to develop a common statement of best practice so that workers’ co-operatives can emerge from the public sector to deliver services across the UK. As I mentioned in my intervention on the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, work has also been done in Wales to tackle the issues affecting the Welsh labour market. Such work has to be encouraged, because we have middle-aged unemployment on the increase, we have to deal with those who have dropped out of school without qualifications, and of course we need to continue the work increase youth employment.

The Scottish National party manifesto in 2016 said:

“We will encourage and support third sector organisations, social enterprises, and credit unions to enter the market place to fill gaps in the provision of services or to offer alternatives to current providers that are not offering services people can access easily or affordably. This includes energy, banking, payday loans, debt management, and funeral planning.”

The most sensible decision that I have ever made about my finances was when I was an employee of Glasgow City Council and I joined the Glasgow Credit Union, the largest credit union in the UK. It was probably the best financial decision I have ever made, because membership of a credit union encourages sensible borrowing as well as saving. I would like the credit union movement to flourish over the next few years, because too many areas in our country are falling into bad debt and having to deal with the associated issues.
Research has shown that money worries and debt problems can lead to ill health, absence from work and low productivity. So just as I received an education when I was a young person entering the workplace and joining a trade union, we need to educate young people about money and make it easier for adults to save and borrow via credit unions. If we continue to promote credit unions, it will save public funds in the long term.

It also comes as no surprise to me that the co-operative model is a success story in these difficult times, when we see austerity across the EU. As someone who lives in Scotland—I assure you, Mr Hollobone, that Scotland will remain in the EU—I know that co-operatives add 5% to the GDP of every single EU nation, and so they are hugely important for economic and social development. I will support the motion this afternoon.

2.6 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you as Chair this afternoon, Mr Hollobone.

It is a great honour and privilege to give my maiden speech as a Labour and Co-operative MP; I am No. 25. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this important debate. I am proud of what the co-operative movement has achieved in the UK, Wales and Neath.

The history of co-operatives in Wales is a rich one. Indeed, the father of the co-operative movement, Mr Robert Owen, was Welsh, as was William Hazell, a little-known but important figure to emerge from the south Wales coalfield. Typically for a man living in the valleys at that time, Hazell was a miner and endured much hardship. A modest and humble existence belies his great achievements, and it is in his deeds of promoting collective well-being and solidarity that we must seek inspiration for a modern world riven with individualism and self-interest. He may not have been born in Wales but his values are all Welsh—camaraderie, learning and success. I will take this opportunity to applaud my good friend Alun Burge on his excellent biography of William Hazell.

The need for co-operatives has never been greater than in the 21st century. Only eight years ago, we witnessed the deepest recession since the great depression and a banking crisis that almost brought an end to the world as we know it. Capitalism has lived through a 20-year victory crisis, during which the accepted model of societal organisation has continued to leave behind 20% of the population. Only three weeks ago, the UK voted to leave the European Union, which has been criticised for its contribution to globalisation but which actually offers a viable route to a united, socially just Europe, with workers’ rights, structural funding and the values of internationalism.

As we move through the early part of the new millennium, it is clear that business as usual simply will not do. Co-operation, consensus and community are notions that are the founding principles not only of co-operatives but of the Labour party, and it is by adhering to these shared values that figures from across the Labour and Co-operative movement have led the development of organisations that have anchored communities during difficult times and helped to create a buffer against global economic shifts.

I only have to look at my constituency of Neath for examples of such activism. If you will allow me to indulge myself for a moment, Mr Hollobone, I would like to take you on a tour of co-operatives in Neath—past, present and future. I will resist the temptation to furnish you with the details of the many employee-owned businesses that have formed in Neath during the last century, and instead share with you the stories of a few key organisations that have emerged since the dawn of deindustrialisation and that have provided us with jobs and services in places where they scarcely exist.

Dove Workshop and Glyneath Training Centre are two such organisations, operating in the more remote villages towards the north of my constituency. Those groups were established as community co-operatives to provide education and opportunities in places where those things would not otherwise happen. They run courses from unaccredited entry-level classes to part-time degrees, provide nursery places, operate cafes and develop community activities. Crucially, they employ more than 60 people and together turn over £1 million a year. That is a significant contribution to the local economy, and evidence tells us that that money and those jobs stay local.

Another example of the sophisticated simplicity of the concept is the humble food co-operative. We are well-versed in the best-known incarnation, and indeed I am sure many of us do our shopping there, but let us remember the most basic version, where groups of people get together for the benefit of collective purchasing or growing accessible and affordable fresh fruit and vegetables. I commend those who continue to operate across Neath.

Most recently, we have seen the rise of Neath Port Talbot credit union, a member-owned bank that provides affordable loans and savings accounts and delivers financial inclusion in practical terms. I am a member. We all know the benefits of credit unions, but we must not underestimate their ability to help to lift people out of real poverty. Co-operatives in Neath, Wales and further afield are demonstrating the stakeholder economy in action. While I have described organisations that have fought against hardship, co-operatives are not merely about progress in the face of adversity; they are a proactive substitute to the usual model of business, which is unpredictable and exploitative.

It is important to point out that William Hazell believed co-operation to be the alternative to capitalism. What we see in examples such as Tower Colliery, Welsh Water and John Lewis are businesses that work differently and put the customer, worker or stakeholder before any bottom line. Tower was bought out by workers and management through the sheer will of combined effort. They made a success of a mine in a community that had so heavily relied on it and from which the private sector had retreated. Welsh Water is a members co-operative set up by people driven by their passion to provide the people of Wales with the best possible services and not compromised by the need to maximise a profit on an essential utility. John Lewis is the company whose workers are all partners, where the chief executive’s pay is linked to that of the cleaners and whose employees share equally in any surplus, regardless of their position.

Co-operatives make a huge contribution to the economy, both financially and socially, and have done so for many years. Society is made up of stakeholders and partners,
not shareholders and owners, and co-operatives offer an opportunity to build an economy on the values of collectivism, democracy and fairness.

2.12 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, am extremely proud to be a Labour and a Co-operative MP. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for bringing this debate.

It is always a pleasure to talk about co-operative values and principles and the contribution that co-operatives make to our economy. It is not just a dynamic that we see today. The impact historically over a huge amount of time, going all the way back to the Rochdale pioneers, shows that co-operative principles were as relevant then as they are today. Those principles, which we see around the world, are voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, economic participation of members, autonomy, independence, education and training, co-operation and concern for community. Those principles all have a great deal to offer for the economic challenges that we face today. Never have the values of self-help, responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity been more important.

With those values in mind, it is incredible to reflect that we see more than 7,000 co-operatives in this country. Co-operatives make a huge contribution of £34 billion to the British economy and are a vital part of the economic picture. A quarter of the UK population are members of co-operatives, and the importance of those values should not be underestimated.

Those values are particularly important today because of the climate and the challenges we face with the global economy. Since the crash in 2008, we have seen a lack of trust in our financial institutions, growing insecurity and instability in globalisation, a wealth of unethical practices and a casino capitalism that brought the crash that has had such devastating consequences. The pressures of the global economy have brought huge opportunities as well as that great disruption. As a result and as the Brexit vote showed, particularly in my constituency, many people feel insecure and left behind by the benefits of globalisation.

As we look forward, the technology-driven change that is reforming the world we live in is opening up exciting possibilities to improve the way we live and work, creating new industries and new kinds of work, and bringing down social barriers. However, it also poses real challenges, particularly in this transition period as the status quo in many areas of our society and economy is swept away. The job for life is now rarer, replaced with less secure work and more self-employment. The next generation of automation could see more jobs replaced by robots. For policy makers, that means grasping new means to manage the resulting economic and social change. For those on the centre left of politics, particularly those of us who are co-operators, the task is even greater, as our commitment to working for an equal and just world faces new frontiers. The need for progressive and co-operative policies—that ensure the gains from the changes of the technology revolution are shared, that people are empowered and that those at threat of losing out are protected—is greater now than ever before.

It is often said that globalisation diminishes the power of the state and renders the traditional levers available to Governments less effective. For the political right, that conforms with their deeply held belief that markets work best without state intervention. As a co-operator, my view is that a co-operative state can play an important role in supporting and encouraging better co-operation, more self-help, more mutual support and fairer regulation.

Co-operative and mutual ideals can help to tackle the growing inequality in the global economy and some of the global insecurities that are seeing communities left behind. As co-operators, we would like to see freelancers coming together to form co-operatives for shared services. Colleagues have given examples of music teachers coming together. We know of examples of co-operators in social care locally and in our co-operative councils movement. There is real flexibility and an opportunity for people to come together to share their services. Instead of being self-employed, with all the flexibility and insecurity that that involves, they have an opportunity to work together and support each other.

We would therefore like to see the Government recognise this growing self-employed workforce in an insecure world and develop organising strategies for self-employed workers, bringing together trade unions and the co-operative sector to find solutions. The development of organising strategies should involve consideration of key priorities for action, including the primary sectors, such as the creative industries, care services and the green economy.

In primary services, that includes: credit unions for freelancers, the provision of micro-insurance and related services such as debt collection, tax accounting and legal advice, the scope for platform co-operatives and sources of capital for co-operative business development. Those are vital steps that the Government could support to create a better environment for local co-operatives to thrive.

We would also like to see more profit-sharing proposals. The Co-operative party calls on the Government to legislate to ensure that all businesses with more than 50 employees can set up a profit-sharing scheme with their staff, with a minimum profit share pot set aside based on a calculation of annual profits and financial position. We would like to see duty to involve, in which the European stakeholder approach to business would be embraced. Through duty to involve, employees are given a formal role in making decisions about how a company is run, with works councils operating in workplaces.

We welcome the commitment and perhaps belated conversion of the former Home Secretary, now Prime Minister, to co-operative values and principles.

We would like to see employees on company boards. The Co-operative party is calling for company law to be modified to ensure that representation is given to employees and other identified stakeholders in all publicly listed companies. We would like to see tax incentives for employee ownership. As it stands, the Government spend £615 million a year on tax incentives for employee ownership, but it is poorly targeted towards individual shareholdings and the remuneration of senior executives. We would like to see tax relief offered to all-employee share ownership schemes, which require employees to purchase and hold shares for a number of years to benefit. That would save the Government £285 million a year. We are calling for £50 million a year to be invested in giving permanent employee benefit trusts
the same tax treatment as other schemes, with the other £235 million targeted at schemes that give employees a collective, democratic voice.

We would also like to see tax incentives for community energy and supporteer-owned sports clubs and the statutory right to request employee ownership. Employee buy-outs can often be an attractive route for business succession, because they transfer ownership to people with a genuine interest in an enterprise’s long-term success and can increase the likelihood of the enterprise continuing to provide trade and jobs locally.

Those are some of the proposals we would like to see. It is clearer than ever that the principles that we have seen over the last 100 years remain as relevant and vital today, as we face the future challenges of technology and an insecure globalised world, as they were at the time of those great pioneers back in 1844.

2.20 pm

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and I join my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) and other hon. Members in praising my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this Back-Bench debate. He and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), for Neath (Christina Rees) and for Redcar ranged strategically in their contributions across the co-op sector. I do not intend to do that, but hope to pick out one or two particular issues to press the Minister on.

I welcome the contribution of the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker). I am not sure I would have travelled the same path to get to the enthusiasm for co-operatives and mutuals that he described, but I recognise that his commitment to the sector is genuine. I will not say any more—I do not want to damage his prospects for advancement today—but it is good to have a Conservative speaking up for co-operatives as well. Normally, it is left to Labour Members, so it is a welcome change.

One area in which the hon. Gentleman and I have co-operated is advocating for co-operative change to the way that some of our major public service institutions are currently governed. I wonder if I might encourage the Minister and shadow Minister to take an open-minded view of the proposals to turn Channel 4 and the BBC into mutuals. What do I mean by that? I mean allowing those who watch Channel 4 and those who pay the BBC licence fee to become members and therefore to have a vote on who should sit on the board of those bodies—putting the public back into two critical public services.

I also hope that, in time, we will see the new Mayor of London seek to do the same with Transport for London, giving commuters the chance to vote on who should sit on its board alongside the Mayor. In that very direct way, people who depend on these vital public services will have more influence over their direction and future strategy.

Mr Baker: May I just assert my complete support for the idea of mutualising both Channel 4 and the BBC? Channel 4 would be an enormous mutualisation, but a much smaller one than the BBC. I would encourage the Government to look very seriously at recapitalising ordinary people by giving them the opportunity to take a real ownership stake in those very important public institutions.

Mr Thomas: Having ruined my own career, and probably his too, by praising the hon. Gentleman, let me move on to other areas that we have not discussed prior to the debate.

One of the things that many co-operative businesses active in their communities point out is the way that the internet is changing the nature of retailing. By definition, many internet retailers do not have large property footprints in particular communities and therefore pay substantially less in property tax than those who are offering a direct service on high streets in communities up and down the land. I support the call of many in the co-op retail movement for a review of the business rates they have to pay by comparison to the taxes that online businesses such as Amazon have to pay at the moment, which are substantially less.

In my earlier intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, I raised the potential contribution of the military credit union. I hope Ministers in the new Government will go further than just support for a military credit union and will recognise the huge benefits of trying to extend credit union membership. In particular, I would like to see a right to save, so that anybody who wants money deducted at payroll and sent to their credit union should be allowed to make that request and have that implemented without question. At the moment, it is at the discretion of the employer. Everybody knows that this is a service that can be offered incredibly cheaply by employers, but it is a matter of will. The very best employers do it, but sadly too many do not. Perhaps putting a right to save on the statute book could help to boost membership of credit unions.

I have always very much supported the idea of a British version of the Community Reinvestment Act, which would place a requirement on major banks to account for the services that they provide to the communities from which they take deposits. When those major banks leave those communities and shut branches, there should be an obligation on them to continue to work there, albeit perhaps through credit unions or other community banks operating there. That legislation works extremely well in the United States and is long overdue here in the UK.

I add my voice to those who have called for a profit-sharing requirement on big companies. There is merit in the French idea that 5% of profits should be shared among those employees who have helped to create that profit in the first place. That would seem to be one further way in which we could create an economy that works for all. I commend my hon. Friends and other hon. Members who have participated in this important debate.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the first of the Front-Bench speeches. The recommended guidelines are 10 minutes for the SNP and for the right hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) and for Redcar ranged strategically in their contributions across the co-op sector. I do not intend to do that, but hope to pick out one or two particular issues to press the Minister on.

I welcome the contribution of the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) to wind up the debate.
Given the increasing demand placed on workers today and the impact that 24-hour access to work through phones and emails can have on employees’ mental health—I am sure we and our staff are all well aware of that—putting more ownership in the hands of employees is a model with a lot of merit. The numbers speak for themselves. The White Rose Centre for Employee Ownership, based at the universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York, found that 70% of companies that convert to an employee-owned model report an increased quality of goods and services, 57% report better productivity and 55% report better financial performance.

The co-operative sector currently employs 222,000 workers across the United Kingdom, and co-operatives affect even more of the population than they employ. There are 17.5 million members of co-operatives across the UK—about a quarter of the total population.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) said, the co-operative sector has proven resilient during this period of austerity. Figures from the Cass Business School show that, in the recessionary period of 2008-09, job growth dropped 2.7% but rose to 12.9% in employee-owned firms. Their importance has endured among uncertain economic conditions. Given the current economic conditions and the recent Brexit vote, their importance to the economy is even greater. There is evidence that employee-owned businesses are more resilient and are able to create jobs at a faster rate than their non-employee-owned counterparts during periods of economic instability.

Successive Governments have consistently supported employee ownership. I pay tribute to the coalition Government, which in 2014 introduced a series of tax changes to level the playing field for employee-owned businesses. As a result, shares of profits in indirectly owned and employee-owned businesses are now income tax-free up to the value of £3,600. Business owners can also now benefit from capital gains release when they transfer control of their company to their employees.

However, we must ensure that that legislative support continues. Co-operatives are presently expressing legitimate concerns about details in the 2016 Finance Bill, specifically—I have spoken to a number of businesses that have this concern—that the calculation of the apprenticeship levy will leave employee-owned businesses at a disadvantage compared with conventionally owned businesses. Even worse, there is a real fear that that action could disincentivise the creation of employee-owned businesses in the future. I would be grateful if the Minister commented on that. There has been some speculation about the apprenticeship levy. Given the change in Government, he probably will not be able to clarify that, but any insight he can give will be of great help. A number of businesses, not all of them employee-owned co-operatives, have approached me recently with concerns about the apprenticeship levy. The recent example of BHS and the devastating impact that that has had on its workers shows how important co-operatives and employee-owned businesses are to our economy.

The numbers I have cited demonstrate how important co-operatives are to the economy and the job sector. I do not want their contribution to be diminished in any way by the apprenticeship levy. The present wording of the Finance Bill dictates that the apprenticeship levy does not include dividends to shareholders, but does include bonus payments to employee owners. That will
The vote to leave the EU was a stark confirmation that too many people in our country have been excluded from the fruits of economic growth for too long. Britain’s relationships with the rest of the world are now open for renegotiation, but so is our previous economic model, which was not working in the interests of many communities up and down the country. Labour’s red lines on the economy, which the shadow Chancellor, my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), set out last week, made it clear that we will not allow any future renegotiation to damage the interests of people here. Equally, we should no longer think it is acceptable for the wealth of our society to pile up in the hands of just a few people or in just one corner of our country. We need an economic model that can deliver shared prosperity across the whole country. Business as usual is not an option any more.

Labour Members are clear that co-operatives must be a critical part of rebuilding a new, fairer and more prosperous economy. As we have heard today, the opportunity for co-operatives is huge. Our co-operative sector is currently worth £37 billion. That is substantial, but far smaller than that of similar economies such as Germany and the United States. Our co-operative sector is just 20% the size of Germany’s, but it has grown by 15% since 2010—faster than the rest of the economy—and 15 million people now own a share in a co-operative, up 16% since 2010.

Growth is also occurring across different sectors. Co-operatives UK reports that large numbers of tech co-ops are now being established. The logic of supporting collaborative tech development with a collaborative business model is clear. Platform co-ops, which are online tools that provide collaborative working spaces, are spreading rapidly, especially connected to the work that is carried out in my constituency. Although it is still in its infancy, the co-operative internet is becoming a reality.

Community ownership of energy has boomed in the past five years. The number of community share offers per year increased fivefold between 2010 and 2015, and £60.8 million was invested last year alone. The expansion has been particularly striking in the renewables sector. One study by Cardiff University found that each megawatt of community-owned, small-scale hydrogenation created 10 full-time equivalent jobs. For rural communities with access to natural resources but isolated from other economic activity, that represents a huge boost.

Given the rise of precarious employment and the so-called gig economy, co-operatives have a clear role to play, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth eloquently illustrated. Earlier this year, Co-operatives UK published an excellent paper making that case convincingly. By sharing the costs of necessary administration, co-operatives set up to support the self-employed and micro-businesses can play a vital role in reducing the risks of self-employment. For example, as we have heard, the Musicians Union organising music teachers into co-operatives, rather than letting them sink or swim as individual freelancers, is a fantastic idea.

On the economic case for co-operatives, the vote to leave has clearly brought some of the UK’s economic difficulties into stark, full view. The vote was about more than just the impact of six years of needless austerity. Too many places felt that they had been left to languish in economic and industrial decline, starved of resources and investment. Britain has worse regional
inequality than any other EU member, and our economy has become far too dependent on poorly paid, insecure work. In fact, the stagnation in productivity since 2007 is clear manifestation of economic evidence of a failing national economic model.

Britain’s output per hour now lags far behind comparable economies in the G7. Every hour worked in the UK produces about a third less, on average, than the typical hour worked in Germany, the US or France. The productivity gap, frankly, is now the worst it has been for a generation. That matters, because productivity growth is the engine of economic growth in a developed economy; without it, economic growth is harder to come by. A major part of the productivity problem is that investment in the UK is simply too low, and it has been for a long time. Boosting investment by both Government and business will be essential. Changing business models, however, can also boost productivity, and that is where co-operatives can play an important role.

Worker-owned companies have a clear productivity advantage over conventional businesses. Recent research by the Institute for Public Policy Research has highlighted the potential importance of co-operative business models in driving productivity in otherwise low-paid parts of the economy, such as retail. If we want a secure economy, we need businesses that can grow and succeed. Evidence also suggests that co-operatives are more resilient than conventional businesses. Twice as many co-operatives than other businesses survive the crucial first five years.

I hope the Minister is listening, because we should be more ambitious about what can be achieved through policy. We want to see resilient, high-productivity businesses in an economy that is fairer for everyone. My hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor has previously expressed his ambition to at least double the size of the co-operative economy, which would be a £40 billion boost to the economy, but too much existing Government policy works against that. Cuts to renewable energy, and community generation in particular, make little economic sense. The damage done to genuine community-owned energy schemes through the withdrawals of incentives to investment, such as the seed enterprise investment scheme, has been significant.

The consolidation Act—the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014—was welcome recognition of the importance of the sector, but it did not go far enough in actively promoting co-operative ownership. Opposition Members would like to see greater support for co-operative forms of financing in particular, and we would welcome the Minister commenting on that in his response. Our financial system is simply not delivering as it should be for small businesses. By pooling resources and risks for small business borrowing, mutual guarantee societies could help ambitious small and medium-sized enterprises access the funding they need. Helpful legislation to assist with the formation of such societies would be along the lines of enabling the mobilisation of funds for small businesses through them, clubbing together to raise credit.

Another major challenge that has been touched on today is business succession. Large numbers of small business owners are coming up to retirement over the next few years. Family businesses in particular face what the press has described as a succession crisis. Preston City Council, in Lancashire, inspired by the example of Cleveland, Ohio, developed an extensive programme of work to support its growing co-operative economy. It is actively seeking opportunities to create local co-operatives as part of local business succession, working with the local chamber of commerce to inform local businesses. I point the Minister in the direction of that council if he is looking for ideas.

Labour’s firm belief is that the co-operative sector in general should, and will, continue to make a critical contribution to Britain’s future economic success. We face a period of uncertainty, and the renegotiation of the UK’s relationship with the world is one part of that, but so is the widely admitted failure of the previous six years of austerity policy. A future economic direction has not been set, so the opportunity is there to make a clear break with the failures of the past. Co-operatives, by helping spread the wealth and providing better incentives for investment in capital and in the skills we need for the future, will be an essential part of our new economic direction. What is needed now from the Government is a clear commitment to make that happen. I would appreciate it if the Minister outlined the Government’s future policy direction and tell us his thoughts on my comments and those of other hon. Members.

2.45 pm

The Minister for Civil Society (Mr Rob Wilson): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I hope you will indulge me today, because I feel slightly nervous, as I always do on the first morning of a test match.

I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this important debate. I also compliment him on his excellent timing for it, following as it does the International Day of Co-operatives only a couple of weeks ago.

I congratulate my new shadow, the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), and I wish her the best in her new job. It is a bit disconcerting to have a new shadow here, but with an old shadow, the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas), sitting just behind her.

We have heard some important things today. Certainly, everyone has commented on the huge value we all see in co-operatives in this country. We in the Government share that enthusiasm, because we believe that a balanced economy is the best way to create a healthy economy. That involves a number of different aspects, from rebalancing our economy across the various regions of the UK, to bringing in greater balance in terms of gender diversity in our industries, all of which means encouraging and supporting a diverse range of business models as well.

Co-operative enterprises have a proud history in this country, as a number of hon. Members have commented. Back in the 1760s, weavers in Fenwick were already forming a society to sell cheaper oatmeal and to help their members with savings and loans. Hon. Members might recall the famous work of the great Welsh reformer, Robert Owen, and the Rochdale principles agreed by pioneering artisans in 1844, which paved the way for the co-operatives that exist throughout the world today.

We want to uphold the co-operatives tradition and ingrain it ever deeper in this country. We have nearly 7,000 independent co-operatives across sectors and across the UK—my own constituency has the True Food
Co-op, a not-for-profit community shop that has been selling local food at affordable prices since 2004. I hope you do not mind the constituency plug, Mr Hollobone, in particular today.

I am pleased that the model is increasing further in popularity, with the co-operatives sector growing by 6% a year—that is about 250 new co-operatives every year. Together, as others have said, they make a huge contribution to our economy, worth more than £30 billion and owned by about 17.5 million of our citizens. What makes co-operatives so unique is the democracy that runs through their core: they are run by their members, for their members. From farming co-operatives to football club co-operatives, they are all about their members working together to shape their own service, and their own success.

I noted the interest of the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth in the armed forces credit unions. To remind him, the Government gave £0.5 million from LIBOR funds to establish payroll deductions to allow armed forces personnel to access credit union savings and loans. I understand the project is up and running well, with members joining in large numbers. In due course, it will also serve people in receipt of an armed forces pension. I hope that deals with his concerns.

It is the fact that the co-operative model gives members a stake in their futures that makes it so powerful. A study by the industry trade body Co-operatives UK found that that stake gives members of co-operatives much more motivation and boosts the UK’s productivity to the tune of almost £60 billion. The model is not only productive but highly resilient, as was shown by the financial success of the co-operative sector in the years following the economic downturn of 2008, when it continued to increase its average turnover.

Co-operatives are more productive and more resilient, but they also give their members more control over what matters to them. It is not distant shareholders who have a say; the customers, residents, suppliers or fans that own those businesses set their direction and priorities. Therefore, co-operatives often have a real focus on the social and environmental benefits that those owners want to see. That is why they should undoubtedly be seen as a force for enormous good, not just here in the UK but across the world.

I was asked about learning from overseas. Officials have met the leaders of the co-operative movement in the US to learn about how they have achieved a thriving co-op sector. The Government’s mission-led businesses review, which I commissioned at the turn of the year, will consider the future of key public bodies in light of consultation responses. That will ultimately be for the new Secretary of State at DCMS to consider, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will want to get his views heard in that consultation.

I want to say a few words about the important role that co-operatives play in the social investment market. The Government are committed to helping to develop the retail social investment market, which allows people to invest in causes that they really care about. Community shares, which enable local people to buy shares in local assets and invest in causes that they care about, are a great example of social investment models in action and make up an estimated 6% of the overall UK social investment market. We are excited to see large-scale community share-raising by organisations such as FC United of Manchester, which raised £2 million from 2,000 local people. The Government support such share offers through the social investment tax relief, the second anniversary of which we recently celebrated. Several community share offers have benefited from that relief, which has allowed local people to buy shares in Clevedon pier, Portpatrick harbour and Burley Gate community shop and post office.

We have also taken specific measures to support credit unions, which are financial co-operatives. We have around 500 credit unions in the UK, ranging from large and complex financial institutions to much smaller organisations run by volunteers for just a few hundred members. British credit unions combined have a membership of 1.6 million, more than £2.8 billion in assets and more than £1.2 billion in outstanding loans to members, and play an essential role in broadening the range of financial services on offer to customers in the UK. They aim to promote savings and provide an alternative source of finance. That is good for competition, and it is good for customer choice when it comes to the question of whom to bank with.
Mr Baker: The Minister is quite right: I was slightly harsh. He has reminded us of the Government’s spectacular achievements with co-operatives and mutuals. I simply look forward to us doing even better in this Parliament.

Mr Wilson: I have addressed that point, and I am sure that the Prime Minister will be thinking carefully about what she will do in the coming few weeks. To add to the success that my hon. Friend refers to, we have taken significant steps to support the credit union sector. We are running a credit union expansion project, backed by an investment of almost £40 million. That will help to create a tool to automate loan decisions and help credit unions to decide which loans to make and which to refuse, thereby speeding up that process, and a shared IT system and banking platform will be developed for credit unions to use. Overall, the project aims to help meet the growing demand for modern banking products for people on low incomes by modernising and expanding the credit union sector. Around 7 million people have fallen into the trap of high-cost credit. Some are charged more than 6,000% in interest on short-term loans. By helping credit unions to grow, we aim to save consumers up to £1 billion in loan interest repayments by March 2019.

In short, the Government see enormous value in the co-operative sector because of the contribution it makes not just to our economy but to our communities. That is why we have taken steps to support co-operatives of all kinds and will continue to look at further ways in which we can broaden that support.

2.57 pm

Stephen Doughty: I thank all Members, including the Minister and the Front-Bench spokespeople, for a very co-operative debate. I know it is trite to say that, but we have had some excellent contributions and some significant ideas have been put forward. Whether the Minister continues in his role or someone else takes over, I certainly hope that those ideas are taken forward. According to the wires, we have a new Department for business, energy and industry. I would like co-operatives and driving forward the co-operative agenda to be not just some adjunct on the edge of a Department but at the heart of the Government’s forward strategy for business, the economy and industry. We must provide an environment that facilitates the role of co-operatives in all the sectors that we have discussed in the debate.

Co-operatives and the co-operative model have been an inspiration for many years. They are an inspiration across the world and in some quite difficult economic times. My family has even longer co-operative traditions than some Members might realise. My great-great grandfather, a Mr Wagstaff, actually worked in the co-operative bakeries in Hulme in Manchester in the mid-1800s, not long after the Rochdale pioneers. I was inspired by finding that out and also by joining a co-operative in Canada—the famous Mountain Equipment Co-op, which is one of the most successful in terms of its growth and the contribution that it makes to the Canadian economy—as a teenager.

We have talked about international examples, and it is important that we learn from the co-operative sector in other countries—particularly the United States, Canada and continental Europe. There are examples of where we could do more, particularly in financial services but also in certain other sectors. Facilitating co-operatives is about not just the legislative and regulatory environment but a cultural shift in the economy and society, and a recognition of the role that co-operatives play.

I thank all the Members who have participated in this fruitful and healthy debate, in which we have paid tribute well to co-operatives fortnight. My Co-operative party colleagues and I will continue to work hard with others across the House to pursue this agenda in the months and years to come.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That this House has considered the contribution of cooperatives to the economy.
Maternity Discrimination

3 pm

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered maternity discrimination.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this subject for debate and to my co-sponsors of the application, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevan Hollinrake).

But for long-standing constituency commitments, the latter would have been keen to take part in the debate. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to a former Member of this House, Jo Swinson, who in her role as a Minister in the previous Government commissioned the report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission that forms the backdrop to the debate.

This issue cuts to the heart of the debate about gender inequality. Discrimination against pregnant women and new mothers is a major societal failure. If we are to achieve sustained progress towards women’s economic and social empowerment, achieving compliance with the law on pregnancy and maternity discrimination and extending workplace cultures that support women during their childbearing years is now urgent.

Serious people who have studied this issue in greater depth than I have believe that as a country, we are heading in the wrong direction—according to some, back towards the 1950s. I came to the issue relatively recently as friends and constituents have informally reported their experiences of discrimination as mothers and mothers-to-be. One constituent who had worked for the same firm for 11 years struggled to get any sympathetic hearing for her request to come back part time after giving birth, even though her maternity leave had been covered by two new members of staff, allegedly on a temporary basis. She was eventually told that she would have to come back full time or not at all, before finally being told that her job had disappeared.

Other cases brought to my attention include that of Woman A, who, when she returned from maternity leave, found her maternity cover presenting her with a new team structure, with her reporting to him. Another woman suffered a traumatic miscarriage at work at 12 weeks, and she was met with anger from her manager rather than empathy.

In the case of a woman on secondment, her manager tried to tell her that she was not entitled to her higher duty pay when she was on maternity leave, which understandably caused her considerable distress. In another case, a woman was about to go on maternity leave, and her manager told her that her maternity cover would be in place permanently; they would stay when she came back, so the two of them would be doing the same job. In another case, a woman’s employer learned she was pregnant and gave her project portfolio to another director, effectively making her redundant.

Those are all personal examples that bring to life experience during pregnancy, maternity leave and/or return from maternity leave. If scaled up, that could mean that as many as 390,000 mothers a year experience some form of discrimination.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this extremely important topic to the House. Does he agree that the potential funding cut to the Equality and Human Rights Commission is of significant concern, given the research and work it does and its vital importance to all societies across the UK?

Mr Thomas: The hon. Lady draws attention to an important issue that I am sure the Minister will want to take up. I sympathise with the point she makes.

It is worth saying that the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s recently published research is not its first such work in this area. When it first commissioned research back in 2005, 45% of women reported experiencing discrimination, so it is extremely worrying to find that the situation facing mothers-to-be and new mothers has worsened so dramatically.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Speaking as an employer of someone who has had two children in the last two years, I think it is important to recall that our employees, who ultimately are employees of the House, have rights and protections in their jobs. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that whenever we hear cases of those who are not given those rights, that shows the real need for stronger legislation, regulation and monitoring to ensure that everyone gets what my employees have through their employment by me and the House?

Mr Thomas: I will argue that although there is a need for some legislative change, the major requirement is cultural change. In that regard, there are a number of things that the Government could do to help.

It is worth coming back to the EHRC’s research findings. It pointed out that about one in nine mothers reported that they had felt forced to leave their job, which included those being directly dismissed and made compulsorily redundant and those treated so poorly that they felt they had to leave. About half the mothers who had submitted a request for flexible working said that it resulted in negative consequences for them at work. Potentially, as many as 150,000 mothers a year could be affected. One in 10 mothers were discouraged from attending antenatal opportunities, which could mean 53,000-plus mothers a year. The right to time off to attend antenatal appointments is vital to ensure that women can access the care they need early in their pregnancy and get continuous assessment and advice during pregnancy.

It is welcome that the report shows that the majority of employers were positive about managing most of the statutory rights relating to pregnancy and maternity and recognised that it was in their interests to support pregnant women and those on maternity leave, as that increases staff retention and creates better morale. However, 70% of employers surveyed said they felt women should declare up front during recruitment if they are pregnant—surely a recipe for further discrimination if ever there was one—and 27% felt that pregnancy put an unreasonable cost burden on the workplace.
There can be long-term effects on a woman’s career if she has a baby. According to the TUC, poor treatment at the time of pregnancy or maternity leave can have long-lasting consequences for a woman’s future employment and pay. About a quarter of women do not return to work after maternity leave, and only a minority of those women have made a personal choice to become stay-at-home mothers. Women are more likely to consider stopping work altogether if they experience ill treatment during pregnancy or maternity leave. Discrimination at work can cause stress, anxiety and depression, which in turn can have a long-term effect on the health of a woman and her baby.

We have a strong legal framework to promote family-friendly workplaces. What is lacking at the moment is leadership to change attitudes to pregnant women on the ground in workplaces. I hope the Government will lead a high-profile, ongoing campaign to change attitudes in the workplace. Government-led campaigns down the years have led to significant change. One thinks of the difference we see now with gay relationships—the work of Governments of various parties has led that change. One thinks, too, of action down the years on drink-driving and to promote the use of seatbelts and action that has radically improved road safety. Government-led campaigns can make a significant difference in workplaces and among wider society, and such a campaign is clearly needed now on maternity discrimination.

As I will explain shortly, women knowing what they are entitled to is not sufficient on its own to ensure that they can exercise their rights, but access to information is an essential first step. Maternity Action has called for all women to be given a hard-copy leaflet at their first antenatal appointment, outlining their maternity rights at work and signposting them to other key sources of information and advice. The leaflet would also include a tear-off sheet for women to give to their employers to ensure that they too are aware of their employee’s rights. I understand that the Government have committed to reviewing the existing guidance and the accessibility of information for employers. Perhaps the Minister will update us on the progress of that review and respond specifically to Maternity Action’s suggestions.

Maternity Action has raised the concern that it receives 30 times more calls than it has the resources to answer, prompting the question of how much more needs to be done to ensure that women seeking advice and information on their statutory rights can get the help they need. As I said earlier, access to information is the first step to ensuring that women can enforce their rights, but access to advice and justice is a necessary further step in many circumstances. According to the EHRC’s research, less than 1% of women who believe they have experienced maternity discrimination have made a claim to an employment tribunal.

In June last year, the Government launched a review of the impact of employment tribunal fees. Thirteen months later, we are still waiting for the results, but the numbers already point in a significant direction. Pregnancy-related discrimination cases fell from 1,589 in 2012-13 to just 790 in 2014-15. Sex discrimination cases fell from almost 19,000 to almost 5,000 over the same period—a 76% drop. So although the evidence from the EHRC’s research suggests that maternity discrimination is increasing, the number of women accessing employment tribunals to enforce their legal rights is falling. Indeed, the Select Committee on Justice recently criticised the delay in concluding the review, and its review of court and employment tribunal fees recommended that special consideration be given to women who allege maternity and pregnancy discrimination.

Along with the financial barrier to pursuing a claim, many of the women who took part in the EHRC’s research reported that the three-month time limit for lodging an employment tribunal claim was a significant barrier to accessing justice, as they simply were not in a position to jump through all the hoops associated with putting in a tribunal claim while they were new mothers. The EHRC has specifically recommended that the time limit be extended to six months.

The Minister will not be surprised at my disappointment that the only recommendations that the EHRC made that the Government have not accepted relate to employment tribunal fees and time limits. Will she at least update us on when the results of the Government’s review will be published? Action is urgently needed to ensure women’s access to justice to enforce their rights, particularly when they are pregnant or new mothers.

Employment tribunals should act as the final backstop to enforce women’s maternity rights, but we should surely do everything we can to ensure that things do not reach that stage and that discussions between employees and their employers are approached in a constructive rather than antagonistic way. The EHRC’s first recommendation to the Government was that they work in partnership with the commission and business leaders to develop a joint communications campaign underlining the economic benefits of unlocking and retaining the talent and experience of pregnant women and new mothers. I look forward to hearing from the Minister exactly when and how that will happen.

One key element of supporting pregnant women and new mothers is supporting employers, so that any health and safety risks for expectant mothers can be identified and effectively managed. The EHRC found that one in five employers that had identified risks took no action, and one in five mothers ended up leaving employment because of the risks involved. Too many pregnant women today worry that they are being put in a position of having to choose between their job, their health and the health of their unborn baby.

The excellent trade union USDAW has carried out research among its members and found that employers did not carry out risk assessments for seven out of 10 women. Many USDAW members do manual work stacking shelves or lifting heavy items in warehouses or at checkout. Such examples underline the importance of making progress in developing support for employers, so that they can access all the information they need about maternity and paternity rights and entitlements in one place. Perhaps the Minister will tell us how the Government are encouraging employers to recognise the health and safety needs of pregnant women and new mothers.

The EHRC’s research also demonstrated that much more needs to be done to support women when they return to work and to give stronger rights to flexible working. Roughly 70% of the women who took part in the research requested some form of flexible working arrangement on their return to work. However, half the mothers who had their request formally approved
felt that they had experienced unfavourable treatment as a result, and one third said that they felt uncomfortable asking for any additional flexibility or time off.

The TUC has done research in this area, too. It suggests there to be a significant motherhood pay penalty. By the age of 42, mothers in full-time work earn 11% less than women in full-time work who do not have children. Women who leave their job during pregnancy or who do not return to their job after maternity leave, whether because they have been unfairly dismissed, because of inadequate health and safety procedures or because of inflexible working patterns, often find it very difficult to get back into work at all. There is a clear need to help employers think through how and why they should create a family-friendly workplace. Will the Minister advise us of what steps are being taken to encourage employers to offer different forms of flexible working?

As the EHRC has said, women are still far more likely than men to work part time, but more needs to be done to make flexible working the norm not only for women but for men too, so that all parents are better able to balance their career and family responsibilities, rather than feeling that they have to choose between the two.

I welcome the steps that the previous Government took to introduce shared parental leave, and I am interested in the Minister’s assessment of how that has worked to date. The evidence from other countries that have implemented similar schemes suggests that fathers are much more likely to take up leave that has been designated as father’s leave rather than shared and transferable leave. If we are to see a cultural shift to more family-friendly workplaces, it is crucial that opportunities are opened up for women to progress at work and for men to care for their children. One important step might be to uprate the amount of paid leave for fathers. It would be good to hear the Minister’s initial thoughts on that.

The EHRC’s research has demonstrated the importance of building up a long-term evidence base on maternity and pregnancy discrimination, so that we can better understand how we can tackle it. The TUC has suggested that employers be required to analyse and publish information on how many of their female employees return to work after having children. I welcome the steps that the Government have taken towards reporting on the gender pay gap; that seems an ideal opportunity to gather more information on how employers are supporting their employees through pregnancy and maternity leave.

It is important that employers continue to evaluate their own internal practices and, crucially, their retention rates for pregnant women. It would be instructive to know how many women are still working for their employer one year after returning from maternity leave, for example. Tribunals should be given the power to make recommendations that an employer change its practice when a finding of discrimination is made, so that other women are protected from similar treatment in future.

I have focused so far on how we can better ensure that existing maternity and paternal rights can be upheld, but I want to suggest an additional area for the Government to consider in extending such rights. My constituent Kathryn Stagg is a campaigner on breastfeeding, and I have spoken to her about the problems that many mothers encounter in that area when returning to work. Going back to work is often the first time that a mother will be separated from her baby for a prolonged period. It can often be challenging for mothers who wish to continue breastfeeding to do so, particularly if there are no nursery facilities at or near their workplace. One in five women who have stopped breastfeeding say that returning to work influenced their decision, and half say they would have liked to continue for longer. A number of countries, including the USA, have enshrined in law the right to breastfeed and to express milk, and I urge the Minister to look closely at whether a similar right would be beneficial and appropriate for mothers in the UK and their babies.

There are many examples of good businesses supporting pregnant employees and supporting mothers in their return to work, but overall it appears that we are going backwards. Discrimination is almost twice as bad as it was 10 years ago. The legislation appears to be progressive, but attitudes in the workplace need to change. It is surely the Government’s responsibility to lead the charge, change minds, and ensure that pregnant women and new mums are valued, respected and encouraged at their place of work. This debate gives us the opportunity to speak for women who have experienced maternity discrimination and tell them, “You are not a burden or a troublemaker, and you are entitled to have your rights enforced and respected.”

**3.20 pm**

**Chloe Smith** (Norwich North) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) for so ably introducing this important debate. I also thank the EHRC, which provided an important research base.

The hon. Gentleman took us through that very capably. I join them and the other hon. Members involved in obtaining the debate in saying, with the EHRC campaign, “Power to the Bump”—that is why we are here. Perhaps Ms Buck, you will forgive me a moment of light-heartedness; it is not my style when speaking in this place to draw attention to what I look like rather than what is up here in my head, and I should not take this approach when addressing any other subject matter, but I think, as the Member of the House who is currently pregnant—I am 28 weeks expecting—it may be helpful if I speak in the debate. As I have said, I would not normally encourage this, other than for the sake of my dear mum. She often watches the debates on screen. I do not know whether the camera can take in the full works, rather than just the face and voice.

Joking aside, I am obviously not the first Member of Parliament to have a child and I hope I will not be the last. This place now has a good and evolving history of Members who participate fully in family life, which is an excellent thing. I do not in any way believe that being a prospective mother makes me a better person, or gives me more of an entitlement to speak, but I believe that Parliament is, collectively, better for having young women in it and young parents who can speak on this subject.

**Hannah Bardell:** Does the hon. Lady agree that the elephant in the room—this is a matter for all parties and Parliaments—is perhaps our failure to find a solution
to the fact that there is still no maternity or paternity leave for elected Members, although there is for Ministers. Because of our electoral systems, none of us has found a solution to the question of what a Member does when they become pregnant or become a parent, and what happens when they must return. For example, in this place we must still walk through the Lobbies to vote.

Chloe Smith: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady on that. There is much to do. Given the developing history that I have mentioned of women and young parents—it is not only women—who are Members here and who have young families that they want to look after, it is high time for a more concerted approach across the House. However, the debate is not only about us; this is but one example of a workplace.

Hannah Bardell: In all that we do and all our legislation, we must start with ourselves. We must look inward to look outward and make the changes at home as we make them in the country.

Chloe Smith: I will gladly work with the hon. Lady and others on that point. Now is the time to take such a look at our working practices here. I would be proud to be able to contribute a little to that, from my own experience, and perhaps also to bring others together to do it.

I want to make a short speech to provide some reassurance that we have representatives here who could be role models and talk from deeper, more current experience of raising a young family, while dealing with the important issues of discrimination and the legislative questions that follow from that. I want to make two points. First, speaking directly to young parents who may be watching the debate, I will cheekily borrow the very recent words of our freshly appointed new Prime Minister, who said yesterday that “life is much harder than many people in Westminster realise. You have a job but you don’t always have job security.”

She added:

“I know you’re working around the clock, I know you’re doing your best, and I know that sometimes life can be a struggle.”

I think that is the point we should start from in the debate. I wish the new Prime Minister well in making good on all the aspirations she set out in Downing Street yesterday, and which she will continue to press forward. Our theme in this debate should be that we want to speak for those who may well feel as the Prime Minister described, and who perhaps still need our help, through the right legislative and cultural changes, so that life can be a little less of a struggle as they bring up young families.

My final point is a simple one that relates to something the hon. Member for Harrow West covered briefly—the impact of shared parental leave. Of course it is a point about life after pregnancy rather than maternity discrimination per se—I do not know how specific the hon. Gentleman wants to be about the terms of the debate—but the issue is culturally very important. Shared parental leave gives employers no further justification that a current or prospective member of staff will be caring for children in the future. It is therefore wholly to be welcomed. I look forward to sharing parental leave with my husband, who intends to take leave after I do. I hope that that will serve as a small working example of something that has the potential to suit families of all shapes and sizes. Like the hon. Gentleman, I want that new legal concept to be used more, and to become a comfortable part of mainstream culture. There should be no gender attached to caring for children. There is no need for it; we have come past that point.

I will close there, but I want to repeat how much I welcome the debate and how important the research base is, and my hope that all of us who speak here can give a little bit of power to the bump.

3.28 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Buck. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) and those who signed the request to the Backbench Business Committee to secure this important debate. It is also a pleasure to follow the speech of the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith). I look forward to testing the family-friendlyness of this Parliament on Monday, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), as we are both bringing our children down next week. We will see how that goes.

I find it difficult to believe that we in this House continue to have to debate and protest about maternity discrimination. It says an awful lot about the way women and children are regarded in society, and we must all seek to improve the situation through our words and deeds, in this place and beyond. Maternity Action has said “both pregnancy and maternity discrimination is both widespread and deeply entrenched, with a significant minority of employers holding outdated and wholly inappropriate attitudes.”

It is absolutely unacceptable that 77% of women experience discrimination or negative treatment during pregnancy or maternity, or on their return to work. Maternity discrimination is not a niche issue; it is something that can happen to any woman during pregnancy or while going through the early stages of IVF treatment. Equally, it can happen to people who are adopting, or those going through the early stages of IVF treatment. It also applies to the period after birth and to breastfeeding, as I was glad to see the hon. Member for Harrow West highlight. There is no explicit legal obligation to provide breastfeeding breaks. One of Maternity Action’s excellent series of cards says:

“While there is no explicit legal right to breastfeeding breaks and facilities at work, employers must meet their obligations to a breastfeeding employee under health and safety, flexible working, and anti-discrimination law. And, not only is it simple and inexpensive for employers to do so, but it brings real business benefits such as increased productivity and staff loyalty.”

I absolutely concur with those sentiments. As someone who has breastfed both children at work, being away from them is very difficult and can be painful and embarrassing.

We need to think of ways to get around that and to support mothers when they return to work. We cannot have women giving up breastfeeding, which is so important to maternal and child health, because their employer will not make reasonable adjustments to allow them to do it. We cannot just accept that that discrimination happens. We must find a way of making that kind of discrimination as publicly unacceptable as any other. Ignoring this important issue leads to the extreme
circumstances we saw in the Sports Direct case, in which a woman gave birth on a toilet floor. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, the impact on child and maternal health during pregnancy and the early weeks of life can be significant and long-lasting, and we need to think about that when we consider this issue.

It was only recently that we were discussing this issue in this place, in November last year, just prior to the publication of the EHRC report and research from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. During that debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) made a number of reasonable demands on the Government, which I will briefly repeat. First, he asked that the Government take a key role in ensuring employers are well-informed and clear in their obligations and that smaller businesses in particular are supported; secondly, that the Government do all in their power to inform women of their rights, highlighting best practice and protecting vulnerable groups of women, particularly young women, ethnic minorities, those from other nations who might be unfamiliar with their rights under UK law; agency workers and those in non-unionised workplaces; and thirdly that the information services that support women be well-funded. We cannot rely only on trade unions or websites or on picking things up by chance. We need to fund the services that will actively represent and advise women. Fourthly and lastly, he asked that women be able to access justice via employment tribunals. Since fees were introduced in 2013, there has been a significant and disturbing drop in the number of cases brought. The hon. Member for Harrow West mentioned some of the statistics earlier on, so I shall not repeat them, but it can cost up to £1,200 to make an employment tribunal claim, which can rise to £5,700 if more than one person makes a claim, with further potential costs such as, for example, £1,600 if the decision is appealed.

Those costs represent an enormous barrier to justice, particularly at a time when women are at their most vulnerable. The number of women who actually reach that final tribunal is less than 1%. That is tiny. We need to do much better in ensuring women receive the justice they deserve. At the excellent event earlier on, hosted by Maternity Action, it was highlighted that there can be a gagging clause put in the settlement for women who settle out of court, so they cannot even talk about the experience they have had with that employers. Those employers will get away with that. Fellow women in that company might not know that has happened and other women seeking employment with that company will not be aware it is an employer they need to be wary of.

I am proud to say the Scottish Government are committed to abolishing tribunal fees, which is a significant step. We are not at all complacent in Scotland about the challenges. To that end, my good friend, Jamie Hepburn, the Minister for Employability and Training, announced at the end of June that he is going to chair a working group to identify action to tackle this unacceptable discrimination. That group will work with NHS Health Scotland to ensure that work environments are safe and healthy for pregnant women and new mothers and to provide employment rights information for pregnant women at that first contact. The group will also create guidelines for employers to ensure best practice in the recruitment, retention and development of pregnant workers. The Scottish Government also pledged earlier this year to improve public monitoring of pregnancy and maternity under the Scottish public sector equality duty. As might be expected, the EHRC has welcomed that announcement, saying:

“These commitments from the Scottish Government are very encouraging and show the leadership for change that is needed to create a positive workplace that supports pregnant women and women returning from maternity leave.”

I will briefly touch on some of the issues of returning to work after pregnancy. I asked on Twitter for people to share their experiences of returning to work after pregnancy. They are fairly typical and depressing. One woman said she had left her stressful workplace when pregnant because it was not worth the hassle to stay, while one commented on the discriminatory attitudes and mindset of her managers. Another woman who had worked for eight years with her employer in a reasonably senior role submitted a request on returning to work after maternity leave to go part time or job share, only to be told it was full time or resignation. She felt she was being asked to choose between her child and her job. Those are by no means the worst stories I have heard and colleagues will no doubt share more. They are very much the tip of the iceberg.

Joeli Brearley, of Pregnant Then Screwed, who is at the back of the room with her gorgeous little baby, has been collecting those examples. I urge the Minister and her team to look at the Pregnant Then Screwed website for those examples because they are absolutely brutal. They must be seen and they must be challenged. I encourage all women who are watching this debate to contact their MP and to contact Government Ministers to let them know it is happening. If we do not know which employers are involved we cannot challenge them and we cannot make change.

I also highlight a man who contacted me about paternity leave. He asked about paternity leave in his workplace, only to be met with the response, “Can we say no to that?” No, they cannot; that is not possible. There needs to be more education about the rights of families in the workplace more widely. I visited One Parent Families Scotland last weekend, which highlighted the treatment of pregnant women and new mothers by Jobcentre Plus. It has identified that women are being forced to come off the benefits they are on and encouraged to start thinking about going back to work. They are asked to attend appointments that are not necessary, but they are being called in anyway. That is something that needs to be looked at more widely.

I also highlight young women, in particular, and the EHRC’s “Power to the Bump” campaign, which is absolutely excellent. It highlights that, among all women, those under 25 are six times more likely to report being dismissed as a result of their pregnancy. Will the Minister reflect on that and see what more specifically we can do to support young women? Young women may not know their rights and may not expect to be pregnant. They might suddenly end up in circumstances in which they are having to make serious choices and perhaps there is something to be put in school curriculums to inform young people of their rights around the issue. There is a bit of a gap there because we are not doing that at the
moment. All women should know what their rights are for when that time comes. School is a good place to start with that.

In their response to the EHRC report on maternity discrimination, the UK Government said they are “committed to creating a strong workforce that is fit for the future. To do this we need to make sure that there are no barriers to everyone fulfilling their potential, enabling pregnant women and new mothers to participate fully if they choose to, and giving employers access to the widest possible pool of talent.”

As has been said, the Government accepted many of the report’s recommendations. However, they notably rejected some of those concerning maternity and pregnancy discrimination, in particular around making changes to the employment tribunal fee system to ensure fees are not a barrier for women experiencing pregnancy and maternity discrimination. They said:

“It is too soon to consider whether any action is needed here. In June 2015 the Government announced the start of the post-implementation review of the introduction of fees in the Employment Tribunal. This will consider, insofar as this is possible, any equality impacts that have resulted from the introduction of fees. The review is well underway and will report in due course.”

I urge the Minister to bring forward the response. We need to know the Government’s views and the results of that review.

The further Government response was that:

“There is no evidence from the responses to the research into pregnancy and maternity-related discrimination to suggest that there is a need to increase the time limit for a woman to bring an Employment Tribunal claim.”

As has been said earlier, three months is not good enough; perhaps even six months is not good enough. Some of the women whose cases I have seen only found out about their rights after the event, which is not good enough either. There needs to be less of a bar on that, so that employers do not get away with dismissing somebody because of their pregnancy.

Hannah Bardell: Does my hon. Friend agree that having access to justice is the bedrock of a civilised society? If we cannot offer that to our women and men, and to parents across the country, we are doing them a disservice and we do ourselves a disservice, in terms of our international standing.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is so important that there is not only action, support and information, but that, if employers do not comply with the law, that there is recourse and a means of testing those employers and making them accountable for what they have done.

I hope what I and others have said in the debate will change the Government’s mind and will bring about improvements. Society and business are losing the talent and skills of women in those jobs. Women feel devalued. They may be lost to the labour market or end up in self-employment, not of their own choosing, which brings its own set of challenges. Maternity discrimination is the reinforcement and perpetuation of the gender pay gap, and it undermines women’s place in society. We have a new Prime Minister who claims to be a feminist. I call on her and on the Government to take leadership and to ensure that that is true in deeds and not just words.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Ms Buck. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) on securing this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us this privilege. It is an honour to follow the hon. Members for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who made prescient remarks. I would particularly like to thank Maternity Action and the other organisations that have briefed us for this debate; the facts and the evidence are really important.

When I was expecting my first child 24 years ago and sought sympathy from my mother, she pointed out, “It’s not an illness. Just get on with it.” However, she went on to provide useful advice about what to expect during the different trimesters, how to look after myself, what to ask for and so on. I sought and found information about keeping myself and the growing baby healthy, and I was lucky to work for a sympathetic employer who allowed me paid time off for antenatal appointments, the ability to keep my feet raised, flexible hours to avoid the most crowded times on the tube and so on. I was lucky—I had some statutory rights, even then, and I had an understanding employer, but as we know, that is not true for many women. In fact, it is not true for a growing number of women.

Roll on to 2016. I am a member of the Women and Equalities Committee, and we have been carrying out an inquiry into maternity and pregnancy discrimination. We still have to report, but some of our evidence is available, so I am able to refer to that today. What has shocked us as a Committee is not only that things have not improved recently, but that we appear to be going backwards as a country in our treatment of pregnant women. Our inquiry followed the BIS-EHRC research published in March this year. The EHRC made strong recommendations, as has been mentioned, and we felt it was very important to do a detailed inquiry, to pick up the lead from those findings.

The research found that three out of four mothers said they had a negative and possibly even discriminatory experience during pregnancy and maternity leave and after maternity leave. As others have said, scaled up, that could mean almost 400,000 mothers a year. It is estimated that between 21,000 and 54,000 women feel they have to leave the workforce while pregnant or after giving birth because of risks not being tackled in the workplace. Fifty per cent of all discrimination happens at the point when the woman tells her employer she is pregnant, and the scale of the problem is growing. The percentage of mothers experiencing discrimination has grown by 22% since the equivalent survey of 2005.

With more and more women entering the workplace, it is imperative that maternity discrimination is not allowed to negatively affect the experience of women at work. The business case alone goes without saying. If we lose people from the workforce, or if we lose people in highly skilled jobs to less skilled jobs, that affects all businesses, as well as women’s self-esteem and rights at work. Most employers—over 84%—say they believe it is in their best interests to support pregnant women in their organisations, as well as those on maternity leave, yet only 27% feel that all women’s statutory rights are
reasonable. In addition, 70% of employers feel that pregnant women should give notice of their pregnancy at the recruitment stage. There is obviously a discrepancy between the reported enthusiasm of employers to support pregnant women and the experiences women face of institutional discrimination that requires pregnancy to be known about.

The issue is not specific to particular sectors; it is wide-ranging. Women in areas as diverse as arts and leisure, manufacturing and agriculture all reported high levels of negative experiences. I want to cover a couple of case studies from Maternity Action, which has provided examples of women in a variety of fields who have been subject to discrimination ending in job loss, whether through forced redundancy or treatment so discriminatory it resulted in them having no choice but to leave their jobs. The examples I am about to cover are symptomatic of the universal nature of maternity discrimination, with workers in both office environments and more active occupations being negatively impacted by institutional discrimination.

One woman was working in a salon as a hairdresser. She worked long days, standing for most of the time, and was experiencing severe back pain as a result of her pregnancy. She asked her manager for extra rests between appointments as a health and safety adjustment, which was promised, but whenever she asked to take a break her manager refused. She also asked if she could work shorter days, so that she would not need so many breaks, but that was also refused. She had originally wanted to start her maternity leave two weeks before her due date but ended up bringing it forward to the earliest start date—11 weeks before her due date—because she was struggling so much at work and was concerned for her health.

Another woman worked in childcare, for a small independent nursery. She had been there for five years and had a good relationship with her manager. When she told her manager she was pregnant and asked to discuss her health and safety, she was immediately moved from a room where she was working alongside other colleagues to one where she was working on her own. Her manager started to criticise her work in front of her colleagues and refused to give her time off to attend her antenatal appointments, insisting that she use annual leave. She tried to talk to her manager about those issues, but was told she should be glad she still had a job and that her performance was being monitored. She ended up being signed off sick for stress and resigned before her maternity leave was due to start, as she did not feel she could ever return to work for that employer.

Another woman worked in administrative office work. She had done the same job for three years and always had a good relationship with her manager. When she notified her boss when she was 10 weeks pregnant, she was told that she was unwell, it was better for everyone that she work fewer hours and that her employer was “just looking after her”. As a result of her reduced hours, unsurprisingly her average earnings fell to £80 a week from her 13th week of pregnancy, so she did not qualify for statutory maternity pay.

Those are just some examples that illustrate the scale of the problem, which is massive and growing. What can we and the Government do to address the issue of pregnancy discrimination? There is a raft of legislation to protect the rights of pregnant women and mothers in the workplace, including the four core legal rights: paid time off for antenatal care; maternity leave; maternity pay or allowance; and protection against unfair treatment, discrimination and dismissal. However, it is clear that many employers are not adhering to those rights. It is our duty to ensure that those rights are safeguarded and that the recommendations of the EHRC report in March are upheld.

As has been said, the EHRC recommended improving best practice to promote family-friendly workplaces, effective management and open communication, and improving health and safety management in the workplace, so that employers manage risks effectively and women are not forced to choose between their job and their health or the health of their unborn child. However, we need to push for regulations to become context-specific, because issues of pregnancy are more critical in some work environments, such as firefighting. It is clearly not appropriate to be on active service as a firefighter when pregnant, but that does not mean that women should have to give up their job.

Most of the employers interviewed by the EHRC were willing to accept requests to work flexibly. However, mothers reported that requesting flexible working had negative consequences for them. More than half of mothers reported negative treatment, such as job responsibilities being removed, as a direct consequence of making a request.

The Women and Equalities Committee has already stated, through our “Gender Pay Gap” report, that all jobs should be offered flexibly from the word go, unless there is a reasonable justification not to. At present, employees must wait six months before they can request flexible working. We have been calling for the Government to encourage employers to offer different forms of flexible working when advertising jobs and to allow new employees the right to request it as soon as they start a job. To make flexible working a norm for all genders is to normalise it as a practice, as well as normalising the notion of men in a caring role. There is currently a gap of 38% in median hourly earnings when comparing part-time women with full-time men. In addition, offering senior jobs as flexible or part time would go a long way towards stopping the opportunity gap between men and women as well as between those who have children and those who do not.

The Select Committee had quite a lot of evidence from casual agency and zero-hours workers. Those workers did not even have the rights of employees. We were concerned that they do not have, for instance, a right to paid time off for antenatal appointments; maternity or shared parental leave; a right to request flexible working; or protection against unfair dismissal. Some of our witnesses saw that as a reason for the increase in pregnancy and maternity discrimination. With the increase in casual working and zero-hours contracts, we consider that that
problem will only increase. Citizens Advice suggested to us that the “increased job insecurity” experienced by such workers “impaired on” their “confidence in challenging discrimination and other workplace problems.”

On redundancy and job loss, a key finding from our evidence was that pregnancy and maternity discrimination has increased since that was last researched. Many more women are now under the pressure of being made redundant or being forced to leave their job. Rosalind Bragg of Maternity Action told the Committee that 30,000 women lost their jobs as a result of pregnancy discrimination in 2005, but that figure jumped to 54,000 in 2015.

Your Employment Settlement Service—YESS Law—said that employers who understood the law made women redundant after their return to work so that the protection provided under regulation 10 of the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations 1999 did not apply. That regulation provides that an employee who is made redundant during maternity leave is entitled to any existing and suitable alternative work in preference to other employees, including those at risk of redundancy. I feel that we should go for better protection from unfair redundancies. That is just one of a number of recommendations that I would support; others have been mentioned today.

We know, and the Select Committee found, that the issue of information and advice is critical. With 50% of all discrimination happening at the point at which the woman tells her employer that she is pregnant, it is imperative to provide information to women via channels such as midwives and GPs before the meeting with their employer. As all women go to their first maternity appointment, would that not be a good time? That said, a midwife, in our briefing, said that an appointment of 15 minutes was not long enough to cover both the clinical information that a newly pregnant woman, and particularly a first-time mum, needs and the workplace information. It takes long enough to get the clinical information over, let alone covering essential workplace information as well. I suggest that the Government work with the NHS and others and consider providing information, in a written and online form, that midwives can forward to pregnant women at that first appointment. The Government could also do a lot more in the way of communication on protecting health and wellbeing. That needs to be improved.

We heard particular concerns about women leaving their jobs because health and safety risks had not been tackled. The BIS and EHRC research found that one in 25 of the women surveyed—scaled up, that could be 21,000 women—left her job because health and safety risks had not been tackled properly. Evidence focused particularly on whether employers should be required to do a risk assessment specifically for new and expectant mothers or whether the current generic risk assessment is enough to ensure that risks are dealt with. The EHRC suggested that employers need to get better at talking to women about health and safety throughout their pregnancy. However, Maternity Action said that the general risk assessment was “woefully inadequate” and that employers should be required to do an individual risk assessment.

I have already covered casual and zero-hours contracts. The rights of workers in those jobs need to be considered in relation to any future Government action.

My colleagues have covered access to justice, the appalling institutional discrimination that the fees for employment tribunals involve and the impact that that has had on employees’ rights to take action against discrimination—

Ms Karen Buck (in the Chair): Order. I remind the hon. Lady that the winding-up speeches will start at 4 pm and suggest that she might like to draw her comments to a close.

Ruth Cadbury: I will do so, Ms Buck.

In conclusion, we need not just specific action but overall leadership for change, so that employers attract the best talent, create the conditions for their staff to perform well and avoid the loss of skills and experience that happens as a result of the kind of decisions that women are making when they get pregnant, as we have heard today. I am concerned about the lack of urgency displayed by the Government in tackling pregnancy and maternity discrimination and I hope that, under the new Prime Minister, the Government provide a better model for leadership and look out for the report of the Women and Equalities Committee and our recommendations in order to improve the situation. This is a very important issue.

3.57 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) on securing this extremely important debate.

For many women, the excitement of telling friends and family about their pregnancy is matched by the apprehension about telling their employer. In 2016, that fear should be unfounded, but unfortunately the evidence clearly suggests otherwise. The hon. Gentleman highlighted that in discussing some of the findings from the EHRC and BIS research. He talked about 77% of new mothers experiencing negative treatment at work and about the difficulties faced especially by younger and single mothers, who are most at risk of being badly treated by an employer. Also, 11% of mothers reported that they had felt forced to leave their job. Maternity discrimination is now more common than ever, with 54,000 women forced out of the workplace each year.

The research found that one in 10 women had been discouraged from attending antenatal appointments. Indeed, many women feel uncomfortable about asking for the time off—I know that from my own experience. During my first pregnancy, I was a teacher with an extremely sympathetic employer, but although my employer was supportive, I felt bad about asking for time off to go to my appointments, and I missed several simply because I did not want to burden my colleagues with more work. Many women feel the same. It is now incumbent on employers show some leadership and challenge those ideas when they have pregnant employees.

Those in precarious employment are at even greater risk. How does a woman with unstable employment defend herself against a discriminatory employer? Even
in professions such as law, accountancy, business and education, many women fear challenging the discrimination they face in the workplace.

It was great to hear the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) talk about her own experience, how the experiences of MPs would enrich this debate and how we could be positive role models for the nation. She mentioned “Power to the Bump”; we are all looking forward to welcoming the new arrival in Parliament; let us hope that Parliament is as family-friendly as it purports to be.

This morning, I met women who had experienced maternity discrimination and organisations including Maternity Action, which offers advice on women’s rights. Some of the stories I heard were disturbing, and a comment was made that we are moving back to 1950s employment practices. The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) described her own experience of maternity leave and why she feels we are moving in the wrong direction. She described her thorough work on the Women and Equalities Committee and mentioned that discrimination has increased by 22% since the last report was produced.

The hon. Lady also highlighted the need for more flexible working and mentioned some case studies, but I would like to talk about a couple that I heard this morning. We heard from an agency teacher who had an administration fee deducted from her statutory maternity pay by her agency. This illegal practice, sadly, is not isolated. Another woman had worked for a company for 15 years as a currency trader before having her first child. When she returned to work, her desk had been physically moved to the side of the room, isolating her from the main office activities. Despite her asking two or three times a week for a back-to-work interview, it was six weeks before anybody sat down with her. No attempt was made to train her on the new systems that had been installed during her absence, and although she was now working longer hours than in her previous 15 years, she felt there was no way back after her pregnancy. When she told her employer she was expecting her second child, he threw a pen across the desk at her—as she says, “all because I dared to use my womb.”

During a recent university visit I met some female academics, including a postdoctoral researcher who was pregnant. Although her employer was supportive, she felt that she would have to leave academia when the baby arrived. She talked about the potential difficulties of juggling caring for a baby with an experiment that ran on into the night, and the expectations her peers would have of her behaviour. She said:

“To be successful in academia, this has to be your life.”

Employment tribunals are the last resort for many women, as a number of Members have highlighted this afternoon. Yet the introduction of employment tribunal fees, coupled with the three-month time limits, has done nothing to tackle workplace discrimination. We now have a situation where three quarters of women are experiencing discrimination for having children, but only 1% are taking their case to tribunal. When the UK Government introduced those fees in July 2013, in reality they introduced a barrier to women’s access to justice and a charter for rogue employers. The hon. Member for Harrow West mentioned the review of employment tribunal fees; we have been waiting for the review since July 2015 and still there is nothing, so I ask the Minister whether we can really push forward with that. It is of absolute importance that we get some review of the fees.

Anti-discrimination laws have been in place for 40 years, but women who have experienced discrimination are often not aware of exactly what rights are in place for them. That is compounded in cases where there is no trade union representation. For new mothers and pregnant women, seeking justice from an employer will not be the first priority at that point in their lives, so the three-month time limit on making a claim must be extended to ensure those women have full access to their rights. That point was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who also mentioned the importance of breastfeeding breaks to both an employee’s productivity and their loyalty to a company.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the steps the Scottish Government have taken and the leadership they have shown. The immediate future looks brighter for Scottish women. The Scotland Act 2016 will mean that power over employment tribunals will reside with the Scottish Parliament. I welcome the commitment made by Scotland’s First Minister to taking action to tackle the issue and the announcement that the Scottish Government will abolish tribunal fees in Scotland. In practice, that will mean that Scottish women face fewer barriers when exerting employment rights and in access to justice, and will not face the same financial penalty when trying to tackle rogue employers. Women across the UK must have the same access to that justice; it is to everybody’s advantage; it increases productivity; it is good for the economy; it is good for the health and wellbeing of employees and, most importantly, it is good for children, who are the future of the country.

4.6 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Buck. It is also a pleasure to serve opposite the Minister for the first time. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) for securing this important debate and being the only male speaker in it. I also thank the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) for her excellent contribution and I wish her absolutely well in her pregnancy and in becoming a mum.

Discriminating against women because they are pregnant, breastfeeding or have recently given birth is illegal. It cannot be tolerated and deserves the full force of the law. I am pleased that it seems that some things have moved on a little from the experiences of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) when she was pregnant—but not enough, as she clearly demonstrated in her speech. She reminded us that this is a growing problem and that we need to do more.

A Britain that discriminates against women is not the Britain that I love. I can think of no better Minister to respond to the debate—I admire her for her strong, robust and straight-talking nature, and I am sure she will tackle these issues in the brilliant, no-nonsense style that she normally brings to the Chamber.
Too many women are suffering discrimination in the workplace, and too many are forced to suffer in silence. Maternity discrimination is incredibly common. Three out of four working mothers experience some form of discrimination in their working life. That cannot be tolerated any longer. We have heard many examples outlined today, and we cannot be silent. As lawmakers, we have a duty to uphold the law, and we must demand change on behalf of the 54,000 new mothers a year who lose their job.

As the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) outlined, for too long women have been treated unfairly or discriminated against in the workplace. Too many women feel that having a baby and taking their lawful maternity leave will threaten their job, lead to trouble in the workplace, harm their promotion prospects or, potentially, end their working careers. Unfortunately, we have heard many factual examples of why people feel that way. Pregnant women are told by their midwives to avoid stress for the safety and wellbeing of their unborn baby, but how is it possible for an expectant mum to avoid stress if she faces daily discrimination in the workplace?

Maternity discrimination in the workplace does not have to be obvious or blatant. My constituent Joeli, who has been in the Public Gallery with the little one throughout the debate, is a magnificent and successful project manager. When she was four months pregnant with her first child, her main client sacked her suddenly, without warning. After her experience, she founded the organisation, Pregnant Then Screwed, which collects women’s personal experiences of discrimination and unfair practices at work. It hears from women who feel that they have been punished and pushed out of the workplace for daring to want both a career and family.

Women report being harassed out of their job or forced to take voluntary redundancy. As we have heard, they have very few places to turn for help. Access to an employment tribunal is impossible for women on low pay, shift work or zero-hours contracts. As many Members have said, they face whopping tribunal fees that make it virtually impossible for them to take legal recourse. No wonder less than 1% of women who have experienced maternity discrimination bring claims to tribunal. What good is the law when it is out of reach for too many women? Will the Minister explain how the Government are working to remove the various barriers to women raising complaints, therefore ensuring that all members of society have fair access to justice?

As a proud mother of three, I, like millions of women, know how tough it is to balance the demands of working and raising children; I am sure the Minister can relate to that as another powerful working mum. I appeal today for greater understanding at every level of society of the pressures that new mums face. A lot of questions have been asked today and we have limited time, so I shall stop there, because I want to hear the Minister, who I am sure will respond robustly to those questions.

4.11 pm

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) not only for securing this debate, along with other hon. Members, but for being the only man who has taken part. It is perhaps a pity that more men have not even attended this debate and listened to the wise words of so many other hon. Members, all of whom happen to be women. Let us be honest: it is very difficult to stand and talk about these issues, because as we know it is invariably the case that women are remarkable—far more remarkable than men. We have the most amazing ability to multi-task. Incredibly, we are often the more courageous and the more relaxed, and the better warriors in our lives, and I apologise to any man who takes offence at that.

We are quite remarkable because we produce children, and yet, having produced children, we have this incredible ability to carry on as though nothing else was happening in our lives when we are either carrying those children, because we are pregnant, or when we go on to give birth. I do not want in any way to lessen those women who, by choice or just by bad fortune—whatever it may be—do not experience what I thought was the hugely enjoyable experience of being pregnant. That might place me as a very odd person, but I thought it was great. I do not talk about these things normally, because it is always dangerous to raise people’s expectations. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) has enjoyed her pregnancy and I can assure her mother that she looks absolutely brilliant. She is at one of the best stages—when we seem to be full of energy and we look fabulous. Not all women have that experience.

We have heard stories about women who suffer from often terrible bouts of sickness—the Duchess of Cambridge was extremely poorly in the early stages of her pregnancy—and there are no excuses for employers not to know, understand and take that into account. Being pregnant is not an illness; we do just get on with it, which is another mark of how brilliant we are as women. But for some women, it is not a breeze, and it is not right or fair of employers in any way to discriminate against them and not to understand that.

I am horrified to hear that in this day and age there are still employers who would have any problem—it is not so much about not allowing them—with a woman who needs to go to the clinic on a regular basis. It is not acceptable. If someone had hurt their foot or their arm and had to go and have their cast off or their stitches out, nobody would say to them, “Oh, it’s not really very convenient.” There should be no discrimination at all, including no discrimination when the women have had their babies. I have gone completely away from my prepared speech, which is not unusual.

Alison Thewliss: I thank the Minister very much for the points she is making. For women who are diabetic or are having a particularly difficult pregnancy after a previous pregnancy loss, does she accept that they need those hospital appointments very dearly? They should be encouraged to go to them and nothing should stand in their way.

Anna Soubry: Absolutely. Let us be quite scared about this: as a society, we need people to have children. That is not because they bring us huge amounts of pleasure and joy, which is almost impossible to articulate. Again, I do not like to talk about that because not everybody has the sort of experiences, especially with babies, that some of us do. A lot of people suffer with postnatal depression and a lot of people do not find that they
immediately fall in love with this wonderful bundle and so on, so I think it is really important that we do not talk too much about that, apart from privately, when we can discuss these things. However, we need people to have children—not, as I say, just because it brings great pleasure, especially when it comes out of a loving relationship, and what could be greater and more wonderful than that? We need to have babies as a society because we need the workers and contributors of the future, especially as we are all getting older. That is putting it in hard, callous economic terms, but that is the reality. It behoves us as a society—that includes business and employers—to do the right thing. They should be grateful and happy when somebody in their workforce becomes pregnant—not only to share their pleasure and joy, but for the fact that for society this is a good and beneficial thing. If we can persuade employers to understand the huge wider benefits, it might be part of that improvement in the attitude that we clearly need to see.

In the excellent speeches and contributions we have heard, I do not think anybody mentioned that we need to make it clear that good childcare provision is essential to making mums and dads happy. I am delighted that this Government have committed to providing 30 hours of free childcare for working families and that we provide up to 85% of childcare costs for people on lower incomes and universal credit. We are investing more than £5 billion a year in early education and childcare, which will increase to more than £6 billion in 2019-20. Those are important statistics to put on the record. None the less, we can always do better—that is the reality.

Until we get really good free childcare that every woman and every father can access, it will not make the huge improvements we need. It makes a huge difference, as my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North will discover, if people know that they have rock-solid childcare. There is nothing worse than being at work and having that awful sinking feeling of, “Oh goodness! I’ve got to go off to the childminder”—or the nursery, or wherever—“and pick the children up.” That does working women no favours, so the answer is good childcare.

Chloe Smith: My hon. Friend is a Business Minister, so will she also put out a clarion call to potential entrepreneurs to start up childcare businesses with a view to the new policy coming in from 2017? It should be a win-win all around.

Anna Soubry: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but we have to ensure that the fees are right as well. That is the downside for parents, especially if they are not earning a great deal of money, because the cost of childcare can be extraordinarily high. For many families, it becomes a really difficult balancing act of going back to work and working the hours they want to work, while also having enough money to pay for the childcare. That is why I would love us to work towards a situation in which we can all enjoy free childcare. It is the stuff of dreams, but a great goal to have.

Ruth Cadbury: I welcome the Minister’s comments on childcare, which has not been mentioned, so she is absolutely right to bring it into the debate. Will she pay attention to the funding of the 30-hour option, because in the past few weeks I have met several childcare providers in my constituency who are worried that they will struggle to keep afloat as businesses because of how the 30-hour offer is funded? If that is not sorted out, we will lose childcare places, rather than gain them.

Anna Soubry: Absolutely. It is really important—and I think that somebody said this in their speech—that people complain and bring all these cases to their MP. This is the place to raise such issues, and not just in debate. Write those letters to Ministers and hold them accountable.

As hon. Members know, there is a reshuffle under way. Some people might be surprised to see that I am here, but here I am replying to this debate—actually for a Minister who resigned yesterday. I will not go into all that or into the fact that this morning when I went into the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, my office no longer existed; it had been moved. Hey ho, these are happy jolly times and we move swiftly on.

Many points have been made about tribunals. We have a woman as the new Secretary of State for Justice—for the first time ever, we have a woman Lord Chancellor, which is brilliant news. She is a mother herself. Let us hold her to account on this matter. We now have a new Minister for Women and Equalities. I pay huge tribute to the former Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan). I have no doubt that our new Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), will take up these issues with the rigour that she applied in her previous brief in the Department for International Development. Maternity discrimination issues are really important and we must put them absolutely at the door of Government and our brilliant new woman Prime Minister.

Pregnancy and maternity-related discrimination have no place in today’s workplace and no place in a progressive society. I will not be able to answer all the points raised today, but I undertake that I—or whoever is in my shoes—will write to hon. Members after the debate. Female talent and experience make a huge contribution to the productivity of individual businesses and the economy generally. It does not make sense for employers to alienate a key group of their workforce, as many employers—but not enough—recognise and understand, so for a number of reasons it is surprising that we find ourselves debating pregnancy discrimination.

In response to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), I think it is fair to say that some jobs genuinely are full-time jobs. When somebody goes on maternity leave and wants to come back and change their hours, it can cause problems for a lot of small business employers, in particular. We have to understand that it is not quite as simple for the smaller businesses as it is for some of the larger ones. Some jobs cannot be shared and some really are full-time jobs, but perhaps that is for another debate.

The EHRC has considered the research findings in depth and its recommendations to Government and others reflect that maternity discrimination is in part a cultural issue and that we are not going to change attitudes and behaviours that still fall far short of what we expect in the modern world overnight. I am grateful to the EHRC for the work it has done and continues to do with the Government to take the Government’s response
to its recommendations forward. It is right that we debate this important issue and take it to the highest level of Government.

We need to get it right, and it is important to work with businesses and others to bring about the required change within a legal framework that is already clear. That is why the commission, the Government and our partners, such as ACAS, are doing all the things that they are. We are exploring opportunities with the EHRC to bring on board businesses to articulate the benefits of supporting women and share their good practice across the business community, encouraging peers to join the initiative. That includes exploring how behavioural insights or nudges—techniques that can raise awareness of legal obligations and best practice—can make employers realise and understand that a happy workforce results in high production and all the things that they want to make their business successful and make it grow.

On that note, I thank all contributors to the debate and promise that they will get letters on all the various points raised. I urge them to continue to raise the issue at the highest levels of government, and I will do my part.

4.23 pm

Mr Gareth Thomas: I welcome the Minister’s robust and direct condemnation of the discrimination of pregnant women and new mothers. Getting that restatement from the Government is important. As someone who has been told in no uncertain terms that it is my turn to pick up our daughter from nursery, I understand the Minister’s point about the significant relief of having rock-solid childcare arrangements.

The debate has been extremely useful and wide ranging. I am grateful in particular to Maternity Action and the series of excellent campaigning groups that are working on the issue. I again pay tribute to the EHRC for its work, which formed the backdrop to the debate. I hope the House will indulge me if I take the opportunity to praise my constituents Zenobia Hammond, Sophie Kathir and Kathryn Stagg, who have provided useful insights.

I welcomed the contribution of the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) and I wish her well with her pregnancy. She made important points about the “Power to the Bump” campaign and the benefits of shared parental leave. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), among many points, underlined the cost of tribunal fees as a further major hurdle for women who have borne the brunt of discrimination taking their employers to tribunal and holding them to account.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), in her excellent speech, drew attention to the work of the Women and Equalities Committee, which will be hugely important in ensuring that the debate is not a one-off, but that the issue continues to receive scrutiny in the House.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) helpfully underlined that, amid the joy of being pregnant, the unease of having to tell an employer that one is pregnant is an experience that many who read the proceedings of the debate will recognise and share. She also made an important point about how discrimination has a particular impact on those whose working situation is precarious. One thinks of the rise of those who do contract work and the additional difficulties they will face.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) underlined the fact that there is a growing body of evidence, both anecdotal and serious research, about the scale of pregnancy and maternity discrimination and the need for the Government to take further action, particularly on tribunal fees. The House will have to return to the issue a number of times before we get to the situation we all want, where every pregnant woman and new mother is properly valued by their employer. However, this has been a helpful and useful debate and I particularly welcome the Minister’s contribution.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered maternity discrimination.

4.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 18 July 2016

[MARK PRITCHARD in the Chair]

Student Loans Agreement

4.30 pm

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Given the temperature today, if Members wish to remove their jackets please feel free to do so.

4.31 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 131167 relating to changes to the student loans agreement.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, this afternoon. It may come as a surprise to some people that we are debating this issue in July 2016, as the decision was taken last autumn, but the reason is very simple: it took students some time to realise what decision the Government had made. Those of us who have been in the House for a while know that whenever the former Chancellor spoke, it was wise not just to listen to what he said, whether that was in the autumn statement or the Budget, but to look at the small print. And so it was last year: buried on page 126 of the Budget papers was the Government’s decision to freeze the repayment threshold for student loans at £21,000. Not unreasonably, it took students some time to realise what was happening. That decision was and is a real breach of faith on the Government’s part.

This is the second Parliament in succession in which students have been massively let down. Under the coalition, the Liberal Democrats promised to freeze, or in some cases abolish, tuition fees—as usual with the Liberal Democrats, it depended which part of the country people were in—and then the Government trebled them. This time, when the Government introduced the new student loans system, they promised that the threshold for making repayments would be updated from April 2017 in line with average earnings, but then they chose to freeze it until at least April 2021. The worst thing about that decision is that it is retrospective, so that students who took out a loan at the beginning of this process—let us remember that some of them were only 18 when they did so—have found the conditions of that loan changed, without any right of appeal or recourse to any other relief. People have said, quite rightly, that in a commercial organisation that would not be allowed, but it seems that the Government are not prepared to adhere to the standards that they impose on others.

Why have they done it? The late and fairly unannounced Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, which had some claim to being probably the most unskilled Department in Whitehall, said in 2015:

“We consulted on freezing the repayment threshold.”

So it did. The problem was that the responses were overwhelmingly against a freeze: 84% of respondents were against freezing the threshold and only 5% were in favour. When a Government conduct such a consultation, get a massive thumbs-down and still go ahead, we know that they are on very shaky ground, so we have to dig a little deeper to find out what was really going on. The answer is in another announcement from the Department:

“This increases the financial commitment of borrowers to repaying their loans.”

It added that it expected such a move to generate an extra £3.2 billion over the lifetime of the loans.

There we have it. The Government were not getting enough money in, so they resorted to that rather underhand tactic to get more. There are two simple reasons why they are not getting enough money. First, they have failed to create enough highly skilled jobs in the economy, so many graduates are working in low-paid, low-skilled jobs, often in insecure unemployment, like many other people in the country. In fact, so committed are the Government to the notion of insecurity and low pay in employment that it was possible for them to have a candidate for the leadership of their own party, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who wanted to get rid of all restrictions on small firms—that was before she was given the revolver and the bottle of whisky. In 2012, she said:

“I envisage there being absolutely no regulation whatsoever—no minimum wage, no maternity or paternity rights, no unfair dismissal rights, no pension rights—for the smallest companies”.—[Official Report, 10 May 2012; Vol. 545, c. 209.]

It is not surprising that the Government have failed to create more skilled jobs. In fact, the Higher Education Statistics Agency pointed out last year that a third of graduates were working in low-skilled jobs six months after they graduated and that more than 16,700 graduates were unemployed. They worked as cleaners, office juniors and road sweepers. I am old enough to remember when graduates and students used to take those jobs in their holidays, or sometimes even in the summer after they had finished studying, while they looked for a permanent job and somewhere to live. We were told at the time that it was character-building for us, and it made us realise how lucky we were. Well, the luck has run out for many of today’s graduates. They are not doing those jobs for a few weeks; they are doing them for months, sometimes years, without reaching the level of wages that mean they can pay back their loans. No wonder the system is in chaos.

Secondly, the Government are failing to get this money in because the whole student loan system itself is in chaos. In 2013, the National Audit Office warned BIS that it was in danger of wasting hundreds of millions of pounds because it did not have enough information on the recipients of its loans. In fact, it had no employment information at all for 368,000 people, so it did not know whether they should be paying back or not. The NAO also said that “BIS... consistently over-forecasts how much it expects to collect annually”.

Presumably, they were too frightened of the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) to tell him the truth. At the time, the NAO estimated that a third of loans would not be paid back. The Library forecast a £3.2 billion shortfall, in this Parliament alone, between what the Government expected to collect and what they would actually collect. The former Business, Innovation and Skills Committee went further: in 2014, it suggested that almost half the loans would never be repaid.
The Government's own estimate was that 45% would not be repaid. That is perilously close to the 46.8% threshold at which the Government cease to get back as much as they are paying out.

What did the Government do in response? They did not think, “Well, perhaps the economic model we're pursuing isn't quite right.” They did not think to end the chaos in the Department. Instead, they sold off a bit of the student loan book—mostly old loans from the '90s—and they used this back-door method of collecting more money, adding another flaw to an already flawed system.

Students are clocking up interest at such a rate that it is almost impossible for them to get a grip on what they owe. While they are university, interest is charged at the rate of the retail prices index plus 3%. One student recently posted online his statement from the Student Loans Company, which showed how much interest he was clocking up, sometimes at the rate of £180 each month. For someone earning under £21,000, interest clocks up at the rate of RPI. For someone earning more than that, it is on a sliding scale, so that when they earn £41,000 they are charged interest at the rate of RPI plus 3%.

Two things about that strike me as very interesting. First, the Government use the measure of RPI, when the rest of the time they tell us that the consumer prices index is the correct measure of inflation. They seem to hold two contradictory positions: when they are paying money out to their citizens—in the form of benefits, for example—they say that CPI is the correct measure of inflation, but when they are collecting money, they say that RPI is the correct measure. Holding two contradictory positions at the same time is what George Orwell called “doublethink”. The Government seem to believe in both.

Secondly, by freezing the earnings threshold at £21,000, the Government are ensuring not only that more people are on the wage level at which they start to pay back loans, but that they pay them back with a higher rate of interest. It is a double whammy. Such a piece of chicanery is almost impossible for them to get a grip on what they owe. While they are university, interest is charged at the rate of RPI plus 3%.

I declare an interest: I have two sons, both of whom will have to pay loans back at the higher rate, and both of them have paid fees of more than £9,000 a year. My hon. Friend might also have mentioned graduates like my elder son. He has chosen to work abroad for two years, on a low wage, to get an interesting experience of the world. He is not fully aware of the implications for what he is going to have to pay or how the repayment rates are rolling up year after year.

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend is right. This system is flawed all the way through. Trying to fix it by making it more flawed is not going to work. Today’s students do not have the assurance, which we had in the past, that they will get a decent job. Many graduates are doing low-paid, low-skilled jobs that are perfectly useful but not commensurate with their qualifications. They often move from job to job, with nothing that could be described as a career. The doors of their chosen professions are frequently closed to them because they cannot afford to do the unpaid internships that are currently the way into many jobs.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing this debate. I declare an interest: I have two sons, both of whom will have to pay back at the higher rate, and both of them have paid fees of more than £9,000 a year. My hon. Friend may also have mentioned graduates like my elder son. He has chosen to work abroad for two years, on a low wage, to get an interesting experience of the world. He is not fully aware of the implications for what he is going to have to pay or how the repayment rates are rolling up year after year.

Helen Jones: I am grateful for that intervention. My hon. Friend is right. When students took out loans at the start of university—this was as true under the old system as it is under the new one—many were not really aware of the full implications: when they would have to start to pay them back, how interest accumulates and so on. We would be foolish to expect many of them to be aware of those things at the age of 18. I do not think I or many other Members would have been.

The problems faced by many young graduates are simple. They have little hope of getting into decent jobs and no hope of getting on the housing ladder. Many of them are stuck in rented accommodation, with rents rising every year, meaning that they cannot save for a deposit on a house. Recently released statistics show that this will be the first generation to earn less than the one before. The assumption we always made, certainly when I was growing up, was that each generation would do better than the one before, but that no longer holds good. That is a real betrayal of our young people. What the Government have done with student loans adds to that betrayal. They have failed to understand the implications for young people and to get a grip on the system.

As in so many other matters these days, the Government are making young people pay the price for their failure. The Minister should really think again. With a new Chancellor in place, there is a chance to revisit this matter and get the student loans system on a sensible and sustainable footing. I urge the Minister to take this chance, because what is happening at the moment is totally wrong.

4.47 pm

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for moving the motion, although she could have been slightly more...
charitable towards the Liberal Democrats. This is a subject on which any Liberal Democrat speaks with some trepidation these days, but I voted against the coalition line on increasing student fees [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”] Before that, in 2004, I voted against top-up fees, which Labour promised not to introduce—I do not think the hon. Lady did the same—so the record is mixed, but I can give some testimony on the awful torment the issue has created for the Liberal Democrats. I was party to several very difficult discussions within the party about how we should proceed. In the days of the coalition, those who wanted to increase fees used to put very heavy emphasis on the guarantee that the thresholds would move with inflation and that the £21,000 was a starter, rather than the final word. I suppose it could be argued that that was then and this is now. There are also arguments for keeping the situation as it stands and not making the changes that the current Conservative Government wish to make.

I shall rehearse some of the basic arguments. Every time I voted against either top-up fees or the coalition policy on tuition fees, I predicted, quite wrongly, that those changes would be dreadful for access to university. I have to admit that, empirically, that did not happen, but I was right about one thing: those changes added to student indebtedness every single time. If the Government make the changes they want to make, they will be adding to that indebtedness to the tune of at least £3,000. That is one argument for not making any changes, because young people are certainly indebted enough.

A second argument, which might seem slightly trivial, is that the Government held a consultation on the proposals. Consultations are supposed to be about finding out whether something is a good idea. There were, I think, 489 responses, and 42 organisations responded. Of those who responded, only 5% were in favour, with 84% against. The others were clearly somewhere in between or had mixed feelings. If we have a consultation, then quite clearly there is a purpose behind it. I think the purpose is to find out whether people think something is a good idea, and quite clearly they did not think this was a good idea. The Government then either ignore consultations or pay some heed to them. I think they should pay some heed to them.

There is a second, possibly stronger argument for the Government’s point of view—this refers back to the trauma my party went through over tuition fees. A lot of the debate at that time was not about whether it was a good political thing to do, because we could see the inherent dangers in it—in fact, people underestimated them. Part of the argument, particularly in relation to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, was that the change was absolutely crucial in order to manage the nation’s finances, as part of the austerity programme, which was the emergency brake we needed to apply to an economy going downhill fast.

People argued that at the time, but if we look at the statistics and the impact of that particular fiscal change, we can see that it was not half as big or portentous, and the impact of not making it would not have been anything like what we were told at that time, either by the Treasury or by the Secretary of State at the time, Vince Cable. When I look back at that particular decision, I see one that produced very little gain for the public finances, but an awful lot of pain—political pain for my party in particular and, more importantly, pain for all the students who were affected by it.

That is a pretty solid argument. I am sure that the Minister, who is a literate and intelligent man, can work it all out for himself, but if he looks at the political impact of making the changes that the Government wish to make, he will see that it was basically not an objective worth pursuing, because part of the rationale for the Government doing so was not that they wished to be faithless towards students, but that the country’s circumstances demanded it.

Going on to the country’s circumstances, however, if it is the case that, as the former Chancellor told us several times, the country’s finances are on an upward trend and that we are in a more buoyant position—I think the former Prime Minister said the other day that the economy had been left in a very strong position—why do we need to do worse things now than we had to do in 2010? I just do not follow the logic of that argument, unless we wish to redistribute income in favour of one group rather than another, and that logic has not been spelled out. The argument is “needs must”, but if needs must, why did we agree to one thing in 2010 and then, when the economy is allegedly improving, do something worse later on? That is the second argument disposed of.

The third argument, which I think the hon. Member for Warrington North mentioned, is this business of, “It’s a retrospective change”. Of course, Martin Lewis and people like that are saying, “This is a form of mis-selling.” If a private enterprise had done this, we would regard it as mis-selling and we would all be lobbying for the Government to address the issue. Commercial lenders would simply not be allowed to behave like this.

The Government, and previous Governments, have made a slight case for retrospection. I am aware that, in Treasury circles, retrospective measures have been taken, particularly on tax avoidance and the like—whereby people who set up tax avoidance schemes have subsequently found that they have been outlawed—but on the grounds that the schemes were of such a nature that those involved might reasonably have expected that. The Treasury has taken the view that says: “It looked a rather devious scheme at the time and if it looked devious at the time, then you should have thought it was devious and tried avoiding it, and if you get clobbered later on, well so be it.”

What argument could legitimately be put to students? The only coherent argument that could be put is that they ought to be aware that Governments are intrinsically faithless, but that is not really an acceptable defence a Government could pursue for long. We have a big political problem in this country and it was underlined during the Brexit debate. We have a big political divide in the country and a big problem with establishing that there is genuine inter-generational fairness. As the hon. Lady said, we are looking at millennials ending up in worse financial circumstances over time than their parents and previous generations.

What the Government are doing—and a Universities Minister should be bothered about this—is teaching students a hard and very unwelcome lesson, which is: “Don’t trust Governments. Any contract with a Government isn’t worth the paper it’s written on.” That is an extremely negative message, which the new Prime Minister and the new Government certainly ought not to be too quick to promote it. They should genuinely and urgently reconsider what they are doing, because,
as the hon. Lady said, it will not make a huge difference one way or another now, but it will make a big difference in the message that it sends out to future generations.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): I call Paul Blomfield to speak.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Pritchard: a good choice, but I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) will top my contribution.

It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate with you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on introducing it, in her customary way, so comprehensively and with such passion. I am also pleased to see that the Minister still in his place. I am looking forward to long debates with him in the weeks ahead on the Higher Education and Research Bill, starting tomorrow.

The Minister has drawn a bit of a short straw today, because he has to defend something that is, frankly, pretty indefensible. I am very grateful to all the people who signed the e-petition to ensure that we have this debate today—I think the second highest number were from my constituency. I am also grateful to all those who have written me to share with me the impact this change will have on them—not so much financially, but in the way they feel they have been treated by the Government.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I am sure that my hon. Friend will make a fantastic speech. Like him, I represent many thousands of students in my constituency and, again like him, I have received many emails about this subject. Does he agree with me and indeed with my constituents—Tamsin, Elizabeth, Tom and many more—that these plans are dangerous, unfair and frankly outrageous?

Paul Blomfield: My hon. Friend is perhaps making all our speeches redundant: she has summed it up in a sentence. Nevertheless, I will continue.

My hon. Friend makes an important point. Let me cite one of my constituents who has written to me. Rachel Stamper is due to graduate soon from Sheffield Hallam University. She started her degree—a bachelor of arts in early childhood studies—back in 2013. She made careful calculations before she started. She looked at what the Government said—that she would have to pay back on the money she borrowed. Like everybody else, she was told that from April 2017 the £21,000 repayment threshold would start to rise annually with average earnings. She based her decision to go to university on that information, because she thought that she could trust the Government.

Rachel made the calculations about what she could afford on the basis of the trust that she put in the Government. Now, she expects to pay thousands more over the life of her loan, because, given her area of study, she will graduate with an incredibly socially useful degree, fulfilling a positive and useful role within our society, but she is not necessarily going to be a high earner. As Rachel said to me, this is about more than “just money”:

“A retrospective change will destroy any trust I, and future generations, have in the student finance system, and perhaps even more widely, in the political system as a whole.”

This proposal was part of a double whammy announced by the then Chancellor after the election last July. As Osbornomics seems to have been rejected by the new Prime Minister, perhaps we now have a little bit of wriggle room to examine some of its more toxic components. This change is clearly one of them, because the first part of that double whammy was the abolition of maintenance grants, which in many ways overshadowed the decision we are talking about today. Nevertheless, the change in the threshold is important because it will have a genuine impact on graduates.

Why are we here today? Why are the Government proposing this change? My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North made the point very well. Going back to 2012, the year before the system came in, many of us argued that the proposed new system was not only unfair, but that it had not been properly thought through—there was a back-of-an-envelope calculation of what the cost would be. In particular, we talked about the cost of unrepayable debt—the so-called resource accounting and budgeting, or RAB, charge. I remember the Universities Minister at the time, for whom I had a high regard, arguing on the Floor of the House and in the Select Committee on Education, on the number of occasions we scrutinised him about it, that he was confident that the RAB charge would settle at around 28%. As the conversation went forward over the years, he talked about 30% and then the upper 30s. Then it was 40% and finally, in our last exchange in the Select Committee, he said that the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills was modelling it at more than 50%, at which point the new system was clearly costing us more than the old system, on top of being unfair.

Something had to give, and it was clear before the last general election that something was going to give. I asked Ministers on the Floor of the House for assurances that they would not make students pay for the Government’s own mistakes by changing the terms of the system. I was told, in this great language that people use before elections, that there were no plans to do so. Well, no sooner were the votes counted than the plans were rolled out.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman would have studiously examined, as we all did, all the election manifestos at the time. He will be aware that there was no mention whatsoever of the change in the Conservative manifesto, yet it was imposed within a few months of the party coming to power.

Paul Blomfield: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, which goes back to the issue of trust that is at the heart of today’s debate. We pushed the Government on the matter in the previous Parliament and there was no indication that the change was going to happen. We looked at the manifesto, and there was no indication there either. As soon as the election was out of the way,
it happened: graduates being forced to pay for the Government’s mistakes. As the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) said, there was a consultation on the change. People think, “A consultation—presumably that is because the Government want to listen,” which is not an unreasonable starting point. Some 84% of the respondents said, “This is a bad idea.” What is the Government’s response? “Great stuff. We’ll go ahead.”

We face a system in which not only are those who did not expect it being asked to pay more, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) pointed out, those who will earn the least will be hit the hardest. The Government’s equality impact assessment said:

“In terms of lifetime earnings, our analysis shows the greatest financial impact will be concentrated on those with around median lifetime earnings (between £20,000 and £35,000)”.

The figures are clear—the Government’s own figures. A graduate earning between £21,000 and £36,000 will pay an extra £6,100. By contrast, those earning more than £40,000 will pay an extra £400 and those earning more than £50,000, an extra £200.

A recent Sutton Trust report shows that although the overall average extra repayment will be £2,800—on the trust’s numbers—the gender pay gap means that women graduates will be disproportionately affected. Black students will also be disproportionately affected. The Higher Education Statistics Agency destination of leavers data show that, although the variance in non-black graduates’ salaries is larger than that for black graduates, there is more of a bunching effect for the latter, between £20,000 and £30,000, which is the salary range that will be most affected by the proposed changes. All those discriminatory impacts conflict with the Government’s stated objectives of widening participation in higher education and of trying to get those who are not traditional participants engaged more fully. All that mess is because of the Government’s initial mistakes in introducing the 2010 system.

I represent more than 36,000 students, more than any other Member of Parliament. Thousands graduate from the two universities in my Sheffield constituency. Because of this mess, Sheffield graduates are being made to pay for the Government’s mistakes, with the terms of the deal being changed long after they signed up to it. If a second-hand car salesman tried, years later, to get a customer to pay more than the contracted deal, he would be referred to trading standards. With a bank, there would be action by the Financial Conduct Authority. Why should the Government be subject to different rules? That is not only unfair; it is because the Government want to listen,” which is not an unreasonable starting point. Some 84% of the respondents said, “This is a bad idea.” What is the Government’s response? “Great stuff. We’ll go ahead.”

I also want to focus my speech on the issue of trust. I confess to having something of an axe to grind. I have been a consistent opponent of the tuition fees system introduced by the Labour Government in 1998, the system that was introduced by the Labour Government in the Higher Education Act 2004 and the coalition reforms in 2010 and 2011. It is true that, in all those cases, I did not think that the right direction—an equitable or sustainable direction—for the funding of higher education had been set out, but I do not want to rehearse those arguments. This afternoon, the debate is more about the promises that were made and the trust that students and their parents, teachers and advisers can have in the Government and in the system overall.

In 2011, I was asked by Martin Lewis—who I am delighted to see in the Public Gallery—the founder of moneysavingexpert.com and a trusted consumer champion—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. Forgive me but I have to do this. It is not appropriate, or allowed under the rules, to refer to people in the Public Gallery, however well meaning the reference. I feel uncomfortable saying that, but I have to obey the rules and I know that the hon. Gentleman would want me to highlight them.

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to you, Mr Pritchard. That shows that, even after a year in this place we new Members are still learning.

Martin Lewis was asked by the Minister at the time—now Lord Willetts—to lead an independent taskforce on student finance information. Martin asked me to work with him as his deputy in that endeavour—partly because I had recently finished my term as president of the National Union of Students—to reinforce the fact that, although we were opponents for different reasons and by varying degrees of the reforms that had been put through, we had a shared belief that whatever the merits of the coalition Government’s higher education funding reforms it would be an absolute catastrophe if students were deterred, or their parents or advisers dissuaded them, from going into higher education not because of the substance of the package but because of a misunderstanding of it. We were not going out there to sell the reforms on the basis of their politics or their merits; we were simply going out there to argue the facts and to ensure that people could take an informed view.

I do not regret taking that position, because it is crucial that people who are making decisions about their future, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who sometimes do not have access to the information, advice and guidance that people from wealthier or privately educated backgrounds have, are able to make those decisions based on the facts. We toured schools and speaker events and produced a range of materials. We did our best to empower advisers to give young people making decisions about their future the tools they needed, and we did it in good faith. I have to ask the Minister: how on earth does he think it could be justified in fraud for people who have signed up to a higher education student finance package to see the terms and conditions changed, either during their course or after they have graduated? That is not only unfair,
it entirely undermines confidence in the Government, as teachers, grandparents, parents and students are out there looking at the information and making decisions.

Last week, I was at Caterham High School in my constituency talking to sixth-formers, and among the questions I was asked were: will the student finance system change for me? Will the repayment conditions change? Will the level of grants or loans change? I am afraid to say that I had to give the honest answer, which is, “I don’t know and I can’t give you that guarantee because of the way in which the Government are behaving”.

For the integrity of the system and for people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to be able to make informed choices, the Government have to provide certainty and assurance that the system will not change further down the track. Other Members have rightly pointed out that, if the Government were a private company, we would be absolutely appalled if they were behaving in this way.

The Government may argue that under the small print of legislation it is entirely possible and permissible for Ministers to change the terms and conditions for existing students and graduates, but if a company behaved in such a way, the Financial Conduct Authority would not just be looking at the small print of the terms and conditions, it would also be looking at the marketing material, the sales material and the pitch made by every higher education institution, by the Government, by third-party advisers and by the Independent Taskforce on Student Finance Information. If the FCA came in front of my Committee, it would find it hard to justify a ruling, on the basis of the information and the marketing material that have been distributed, that it was ethically right for a lender to behave in the way the Government are proposing to behave. On that basis, the Government have to think again.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central rightly argued, a change in Government and personnel provides an opportunity to look at the issue with a fresh pair of eyes. The Prime Minister would be congratulated by all parts of the House if she came forward and argued that trust and faith, not just in the student finance system, but in politics itself, were more important than any money saved through the initiative the Government propose. The Government could look to save money in the system through more equitable ways that would lead to higher-earning graduates paying more over the course of their careers than those on middle or lower incomes. I suspect that that is a debate for the passage of the Higher Education and Research Bill.

The Government need to think again on the merits of the arguments that were put forward. They also need to reflect that this issue is of interest not just to students, but to their parents, grandparents, teachers and advisers. Given the damage done under successive Governments to trust in politics—not only on other issues, but on this issue of student finance in particular—I urge the Minister to give this a serious rethink and come forward with alternative proposals that do not lead to Governments changing the terms and conditions for existing students and graduates. If he is not prepared to do that voluntarily, I suspect I will not be the only Member tabling amendments to the Higher Education and Research Bill, so that we can continue this debate and, I hope, gain support from all parts of the House for the Government to act in a different way.

5.12 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for securing and leading the debate on this very important issue and for her work chairing the Petitions Committee. I also thank the 130,000 signatories who have highlighted to Parliament their dissatisfaction and concern about the changes to the student loan repayment structure. Many of those signatories come from areas that have Tory MPs. One could be forgiven for not realising that, given the attendance from Tory MPs in this debate, which I am pleased to note has recently increased by 200% from a grand total of none.

Since becoming an elected Member of this House, I have seen the Conservatives continually attacking workers’ rights and the healthcare system and freezing public sector wages. We have witnessed unequal cuts to welfare and local councils, as well as a substantial reduction in front-line police officers and firefighters, but no single group in society has been given as unfair a deal as our students. They have seen an unfair deal at every turn.

There has been the loss of the education maintenance allowance, which gave people from the poorest backgrounds £30 a week. That might seem a small amount to some, but it gave 12,000 young people their only chance to go on to further education. Many of them went on to university. The coalition Government cut that allowance, and that affected my constituents in Heywood and Middleton. They found that they could no longer afford the bus fares to attend Hopwood Hall, a further education college in my constituency.

State sixth forms have lost a third of their funding, as it has not been ring-fenced from cuts. Mental health services have been overlooked and hugely underfunded. Youth support and advice services have been lost. There are also the changes to voter registration, the lowest rate of house building since the 1920s, the alteration of student nurses bursaries, which have been turned into loans, and the astronomical increase in tuition fees from £3,000 a year to £9,000 a year. In her role as Home Secretary, the new Prime Minister wrongly deported 48,000 international students, and that was before we voted for Brexit.

Students are clearly receiving the worst dealt hand of the lot. The retrospective changes to the student loan repayment system are unacceptable, unjust and underhand. As many Members and hon. Friends have pointed out, if the Government were a registered commercial company and made retrospective changes to their loan terms, the regulator would not permit the process. We are now the regulator in this House and we should not permit the process. We cannot and should not play politics with people’s education.

The average increase in loan repayments will be just under £2,000 across all graduates. As has been mentioned, those from the poorest 30% of households will repay an average of around £3,000 more under the new rules. Freezing the repayment threshold has a proportionately larger impact on repayments by graduates with lower lifetime earnings. All that equates to 2 million graduates
who will end up paying £306 more each year by 2020-21 by comparison with 2016-17. The average student leaving university will have a debt of £44,000 before even acquiring his or her first job.

When the introduction of the tuition fees hike to £9,000 was announced in 2010, the former Prime Minister and the former Chancellor of the Exchequer said that students would only start paying the money back at a graduate’s salary, proclaiming that this was “fairer” and “progressive” and “helped social mobility”. In 2015, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills looked at the current proposal and concluded that it would have a disproportionate impact on women, disabled students and students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. The National Union of Students calculated that students previously eligible for maintenance grants who took out their full loan entitlement on a three-year course would graduate with debts worth more than £50,000. That is not progressive; it is not fairer and it certainly does not help social mobility.

The change will not only affect students; it will also have a significant effect on the taxpayer. The Office for Budget Responsibility estimated that, in 2046, when the first set of graduates on £9,000-a-year fees can have their debts cancelled, £11.6 billion will be scrapped. That will increase to £19.9 billion only two years later. In total, 73% of graduates are now expected to never fully pay off their debt, by comparison with 32% under the old system. Figures from the Royal College of Nursing show that it would take 247 years to repay a NHS loan on a staff nurse’s salary. I know that life expectancy is increasing, but I had not realised that the NHS loan on a staff nurse’s salary. I know that life expectancy is increasing, but I had not realised that the Government expect it to be on that scale.

In their last two manifestos, the Government have said, “We should live within our means,” and, “We shouldn’t pass on levels of debt for future generations to pay,” yet we have seen the debt double to £1.7 trillion since 2010. We have now lost our triple A credit rating, all while burdening younger generations with £44,000-worth of debt before they even get on the job and housing ladder. That is unsustainable and unattainable.

It is now clear that it is the Conservatives who have been reckless and maxed out the nation’s credit card, and it is our children who will be footing the bill. I believe that an investment in knowledge pays the best interest. I hope that the Government will rethink this regressive policy, which is at the heart of all that is underhand, unscrupulous and unfair. If they do not, it will be seen as an act of betrayal for a generation. It is not just a financial and legal issue; most importantly, it is a moral issue.

5.19 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I thank the Petitions Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for scheduling this important debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Pritchard. I am glad to have the opportunity to speak about an issue that will affect many young people in university cities such as my constituency of Cambridge, where more than 700 petitioned me on this issue.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North said, the issue is not new. In fact, I raised it at Prime Minister’s Question Time in December last year, which seems a lifetime ago. At the time—it is extraordinary—the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr Cameron) was otherwise engaged touring Europe and negotiating his deal; it seems such a long time ago. In his absence, the then Chancellor answered. I had asked:

“When the Chancellor tripled student tuition fees, he set the repayment threshold at £21,000. He has now frozen the threshold, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies tells us that many students will bear many extra thousands of pounds in repayments. Given that he has broken his promise, will he send students an apology or just the bill?”—[Official Report, 9 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 989.]

Unsurprisingly, he did not apologise, and students, I fear, are now left with the bill. What he is left with is rather less clear, but he has obviously got more time on his hands.

Changing the threshold at which student loans are to be repaid, as other Members have pointed out, really does not do politics any good. As all of us here know, one of the major challenges facing us is to slowly rebuild, piece by piece, the trust that has been lost in politics. We need to repair the connection between voter and elected representative, and moving the goalposts really does not help. It is clear that current and prospective students are angry, and I cannot blame them. They are being pulled out of the European Union when the majority of them wanted to remain. They are now being denied opportunities and experiences across the continent that just a month ago seemed boundless. Back in 2010 they were misled and tuition fees tripled under the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives. In many university cities like mine, they are being locked out of the housing market, and in many cases locked out of the rental market, with the cost of living constantly rising. The Government have gambled their future away on an exceptionally bad hand. To top it all, young people are being shafted by the Government on student loan agreements. How can we expect them to put any trust in us when this is how they are treated?

As other Members have pointed out, the Government are keen to remind us that there was a consultation, and when 84% responses came back saying, “Don’t do it,” it was ignored. Of 489 responses, 410 were explicitly against keeping the threshold of £21,000 the same for all post-2012 borrowers until April 2021. As others have said, the Government—and local councils, too—lose all authority if they consult the public having already made up their mind what they are going to do. The consultation seems as if it was a charade. In fact, it was a sham, which is a shame, because the respondents’ points were worth listening to. Their main arguments, some of which have been rehearsed, were against freezing the repayment threshold for five years for all existing and new loans. They argued that the policy represents a retroactive change to borrowers’ terms and conditions which, as others have said, would not be allowed to commercial lenders, and that leads to a further loss of trust.

Such loss of trust occurs on a number of levels. The policy goes back on the original deal made between the Government and each student, saddling them with more debt than they signed up for and undermining the fundamental fairness that a contract should entail. It completely disregards the views of those consulting on the policy, including student unions and higher education providers—perhaps they are a part of the group of experts the world no longer believes in. Those most
directly affected are the ones who know what the policy will do. It was snuck in through the back door. It was omitted from the now ex-Chancellor’s spending review speech, and it was introduced furtively and somewhat undemocratically through secondary legislation.

The effects are severe, as we have heard. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills said in its post-consultation report:

“In 2020-21 borrowers will be paying £6 per week, or £306 in the year, more than they will be in 2016-17.”

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has found that freezing the repayment threshold has a proportionately larger impact on repayments by graduates with lower lifetime earnings. It also estimates that a five-year threshold freeze would increase average repayments by almost £4,000, and that it expects middle-income earners to be hardest hit by the threshold freeze. The Government’s own equality analysis agreed. It concluded that the largest increase in lifetime repayments in absolute terms is among middle earners, and the largest increase as a proportion of earnings is among lower earners. The analysis also concluded that the average increase in repayments would be greater for women than for men.

A constituent wrote to me:

“It breaks my heart to see my family saddled with huge debts that will certainly affect their life chances.”

It is imperative that we do not underestimate the impact that an unexpected loss of several thousand extra pounds could have on middle and lower earners struggling to get by. We must look at the changes in a wider context. They come alongside the scrapping of student grants and their replacement with loans, a policy change that the IFS estimates will most affect graduates from lower-income families who go on to become higher earners. Just as we have seen with the Government’s damaging pay to stay housing proposals, the policy effectively penalises social mobility and aspiration. It creates extra barriers for successful graduates from low-income backgrounds, but has little impact on students from the richest households.

I was fascinated to discover that the new Prime Minister said in 1997—we have all said things in the past—that she had a real concern that

“to abolish the maintenance grant and replace it with loans will, far from widening access, narrow it.”—[Official Report, 4 November 1997; Vol. 300, c. 155.]

I wonder whether she will, some years later, revisit her predecessor’s schemes.

Freezing the student repayment threshold also comes alongside changes to tuition fees expected in the Higher Education and Research Bill, which I am sure we will discuss in the days ahead. The Bill will allow some universities to charge tuition fees that rise in line with inflation, creating a greater hierarchy of education, with some simply costing more. As the University and College Union points out, further increasing the cost of higher education to the individual is hardly conducive to widening participation.

The UCU also identifies further potential retrospective changes: many students could begin their courses without knowing the full cost of their study, which could change if the institutional rating changes. All that comes at a time of great instability in the sector. The Universities Minister recently said:

“This Government have done more than any other to put the financing of higher education on to a secure and sustainable footing.”—[Official Report, 27 June 2016; Vol. 612, c. 125.]

Others may see it slightly differently, especially as that was said a few days after the EU referendum, the shockwaves of which are resonating around our universities and research sector. It may be one of the most destabilising events that our higher education sector has experienced in many, many years.

The Government’s original justification for implementing a repayment threshold freeze was that it was necessary to contribute towards debt reduction and to balance the books. As others have said, the rule book seems to have changed. The budget surplus target has been abandoned. Higher education policy has been carved away from one Department and bolted on to another. The Prime Minister said:

“When it comes to opportunity, we won’t entrench the advantages of the fortunate few. We will do everything we can to help anybody, whatever your background, to go as far as your talents will take you.”

Hear, hear to that; let us hold her to that.

Change is afoot, so I hope the Minister can confirm that students will no longer be treated in such a shabby way, but will be treated better. We are already standing amid the broken pieces of the big society and the wreckage of BIS and our place in Europe. Please do not add to that wreckage. Do not break your promises to all those students who trusted you to keep them.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): I shall call the Front-Bench spokesmen and women in a moment. We have a little time today. Typically, Front-Bench spokespeople speak for 10 minutes. However, we have a little extra time if required.

5.28 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): You obviously do not know me if you are telling me I have additional time, Mr Pritchard. It is always a pleasure to serve under your Chairmanship and a pleasure to serve under one of the jackets-off brigade of Chairs. I thank you for that.

I am pleased to be able to contribute to this debate, although if this issue ever finds its way to a specific vote in the Chamber of the House of Commons, I will probably not be allowed to vote on it, thanks to the delights of English votes for English laws, which assumes that nobody in my constituency is affected by the changes or even cares about them. My email in-tray suggests that my constituents are affected and do care.

For me, there are two principal arguments against what the Government have done. First, and most obviously, it is the wrong thing to do. It discourages students, especially those who are less well off, those from ethnic minorities and those who are disabled—the very people who have lost out on university education opportunities in the past—from fulfilling their full academic and professional potential.

Secondly, it is wrong because of the way in which the Government did it. They used a Commons majority to force through changes within a few months of an election.
I should correct hon. Members who said that the proposal was not mentioned in the manifesto; it was, but it was written in such a way—it talked about maintaining improvements and progress made in 2010—that anybody reading that brief mention would think that it was an undertaking to abide by the promise made in 2010. It certainly was not an undertaking to throw that promise out of the window. The way the Government did it was wrong. The fact that they held a consultation, then ignored the views of 84% of respondents means that the entire consultation was a complete and utter waste of money. We have to wonder whether it was carried out just to create a veneer of respectability.

Some people would advance a third argument about the legality of the whole thing. I am not going to get into that argument because I am not a lawyer. For me, this is not about whether it is legal or illegal. It is wrong—end of story. Even if it is ever proven to be completely within the law, it is still wrong; that is why it should be changed. It is wrong because it stands in the way of us moving towards the kind of society that I and all Opposition Members want to see. If we believe the new Prime Minister, it is the kind of society that she wants to see, too.

The Government’s equalities assessment, which is cited in the House of Commons Library briefing, and which some Members have referred to, states that the average increase in repayments is likely to be greater among women than among men. Although the findings about the impact on people with disabilities and those from ethnic minority groups are not clear, there is a high likelihood that, because of their income range, they will have to pay proportionately more. This is not a step towards creating a society in which women, people with disabilities and people from ethnic minorities are finally able to make up for the disadvantages that they have had to bear for far too many generations. The Government can hide behind a fig leaf, as they did in the analysis by saying that the impacts are small, very small or relatively small, but a backwards step is a backwards step, regardless of how small it is. The fact that the Government made the change in the full knowledge, from their own research, that it is a backward step has to make us wonder how committed they really are, whether under the previous or the new Prime Minister, to opening up access to university education for all.

I believe that it is not work per se but education that helps people to deal with poverty. We can see perfectly well that more people are working, yet more are in poverty. The reason why so many people are in poverty is that they are working in low-paid and insecure jobs. The way to deal with that in the longer term is to increase the standards of education and the opportunities for education that are available to each and every person. Education should be limited only by a person’s ability to learn and willingness to work, not by their ability to pay, their parents’ ability to pay or, in some cases, their children’s ability to pay—that is how long the loans are going to continue.

All this is in marked contrast with what is happening under the Scottish Government. I want to talk about that briefly, because it demonstrates that the changes are not necessary; they are a choice. In Scotland, we have a deeply held belief that education is for everybody, and that it should be a way of reducing inequalities, rather than perpetuating or even increasing them. While the Tories, with some support—with the honourable exception of the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh)—trebled tuition fees in England, the Scottish National party Government in Scotland continued to protect our 120,000-plus undergraduates from having to pay tuition fees. The Scottish Government continue to fund the education maintenance allowance scheme, which helps 132,000 young people from poorer families to continue their school and college education. The Conservative Government down here have abolished that scheme.

We do not see financial support to students as a giveaway. It is obscene that the Government talk about the notional £100,000 of additional earnings that graduates can expect to earn over their lifetime. If graduates earn that much more because they are graduates, they will pay it back through their income tax anyway. That is how high earners should be taxed. They should not be taxed additionally because they happened to have attended university. I have never ever met a nurse, a teacher or a social worker who enrolled as a student of those professions to get rich. I have never known a student nurse, a student teacher or a student social worker who could tell me on the day they matriculated or the day they graduated how much they expected to be paid over their lifetime. That is simply not what brings people into those vital and all-too-often undervalued professions. Let us stop saying that these changes are minor because they do not make much difference to people’s long-term, lifetime earnings. They are enough to deter people who are scared of the idea of leaving university with a student loan debt that is two or three times as much as their first annual pay packet is likely to be.

Members may not be aware that the Scottish Government continue to provide bursaries for nurses and midwives because we accept the need to train highly qualified nurses and midwives to run the health service in future. We continue to give non-repayable bursaries of £6,578 per year, with additional support if the student nurse or midwife has childcare responsibilities, for example. By comparison, the UK Government seem more interested in making sure every newly qualified nurse or doctor comes out of university with terrifying levels of debt. They should now expect to have unfair employment conditions imposed on them at any time on the Secretary of State’s whim without proper negotiation or consultation. The Government may think that bringing in immigrant workers will plug the desperate skills shortage in the health service, but they are closing the door to prevent the desperately needed workers from coming into the country. The Government then wonder why people do not have any confidence in them to run the health service or any other public service.

Even before these changes began to bite—figures were cited earlier, but these are the most up-to-date ones I was able to find—the average student loan debt for a new graduate in England was £24,540. In Scotland, it was just a shade over £10,500. That is the difference that can be made to a new graduate’s starting position if we have a Government who believe in investing in higher education and supporting students at a time when they should be concentrating on their studies, not worrying about their bank balance.

I cited those figures to demonstrate that the Government’s claim that they cannot afford a fairer system of student support is nonsense. It is perfectly affordable if they
make it a priority. The Scottish Government think it is important and are prepared to make difficult decisions elsewhere to invest in education, not simply because of the benefits to the people who are educated, but because of the immense and immeasurable benefits that those people bring to our society by working in our health service, our schools, our public services and our private industries to boost the economy and generate wealth that we can all share.

At 10 o’clock tonight, almost everybody in this Parliament who says that we cannot afford to treat our students fairly—not many of them are represented here—will vote to spend £200 thousand million on something whose only possible purpose is to commit a crime on an unimaginable scale. That is where our priorities are just now. If anybody watching this debate thinks it has been one-sided—I have done a rough calculation, and about 85% of people have spoken against what the Government have done—that is how one-sided the Government’s consultation was: 84% were against the Government. It is no surprise that the Minister is here on his own, and that none of his pals want to speak in defence of the policy. A couple have come along, but none wanted to speak. The imbalance in this debate is an indication of the depth of feeling across society as a whole against what the Government have done. It is not too late for the Government to change, and I hope they will do so very quickly.

5.38 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I welcome the Minister to his place. This is the first time I have debated with him. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) and for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), who outlined the issue of trust. They demonstrated how unfair this retrospective change is and spoke about its long-term impact on trust in the Government. Before the general election, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central asked about this specific issue. Despite there being no indication before the votes were cast in the general election, no indication in the Conservative party manifesto, the change has happened. That is outrageous, as he pointed out. I agree with him that a retrospective change will destroy any faith that students have in the political system. I urge the Minister to think about that carefully.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) asked the Prime Minister a question, and demanded an apology, and not just a bill, on behalf of many thousands of his constituents. Unfortunately, the cost of this disastrous Government has fallen upon our students and the next generation.

The issue of trust goes to the heart of the debate. As my hon. Friends have exposed, time and again the Government have offered grand rhetoric on improving access to higher education and social mobility, but time and again they have failed to deliver. Indeed, they have made matters worse, especially if we take into account the Higher Education and Research Bill, which is having its Second Reading tomorrow, and its potential to increase tuition fees.

I associate myself with the words of the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh). I commend him for his commitment to education, both inside the House in his work as a Member of Parliament and before coming to this place as a teacher and school leader. He clearly demonstrates a huge amount of knowledge and has great respect in the field.

Every time the Government legislate on higher education, we know that it will mean cuts to the services that mature students and those from low-income backgrounds need and an increased debt burden on our students and that it will make it more difficult for those from low-income backgrounds to attend the top universities. That takes place in the context of spending on adult skills falling in real terms by 41% in the previous Parliament, and funding for post-16 education falling by nearly 16%, the deepest cuts that post-16 education has ever seen.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) pointed out, in higher education, the Government, not content with tripling tuition fees, scrapped maintenance grants for the poorest students, meaning that they will graduate with more and more debt. That change, justified as a means to cut the national debt, will fail even the test that the Government have set themselves—the Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that, for each cohort of graduates, the measure will save the Government only 3% of their contribution to students’ higher education.

Who will pay the price for the Government’s penny pinching from the HE budget? As my hon. Friend said, it will be those students who come from poor backgrounds who go on to earn high salaries. Having needed maintenance loans to get through university, they will face a far higher debt burden than their well-off peers, and will spend more and longer paying off the debt that the Government have lumbered them with. She is right to say that the changes are unacceptable, unjust and underhanded, and that the Conservatives have maxed out the nation’s credit card and it is our children who will be footing the bill.

That is the substance of the issue before us today: the Government’s decision to freeze the repayment threshold on student loans. The decision announced in last year’s autumn statement to freeze the threshold retrospectively is only the latest in a long line of attacks on access to education and social mobility. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden) was right when he said that the change amounts to “mis-selling” of loans to students since 2012. He was right to say that it “will be a disincentive to future loan applicants, in further education as well as higher education”.

Students will now feel that they are writing a blank cheque to the Government, whom they have no reason at all to trust. Will the Minister at least have the decency to tell us why any student should ever trust his Government again? I cannot put it any better than my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who described the change as dangerous, unfair and outrageous.
The Government, when they trebled the cost of tuition for students, said that students had at least been given a more generous income allowance before having to start paying back their loans. However, even that small consolation will now cease to be true. The IFS has shown that, after five years of the freeze, the repayment threshold will, in real terms, be the same as it was before fees were trebled. The Government promised investment and gave nothing but more debt. Again, it will be middle earners and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who will suffer the most.

The IFS has shown that the average student, as many Members have pointed out, will lose £6,000 as a result of the change. That is outrageous and indefensible. Hard-working students and socially mobile graduates from low-income backgrounds, the very people we should be giving every encouragement and opportunity to pursue higher education, are the very people the Government seem most determined to put off.

The Government's own consultation said that women, black and minority ethnic students, those with disabilities, and mature students will be disproportionately affected. As my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) outlined today and in her Adjournment debate last month, many groups who have historically not had access to higher education are set to face a £6,000 disincentive. When the Government talk about widening access to education, they must tell us who exactly they are trying to help.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North pointed out, no private company would get away with retrospectively changing the terms of a deal, as the Government have done. Perhaps the Minister can at least tell us their justification for doing so. Given that it will be several years before the Exchequer makes any substantial gains from the policy, can the Minister tell us how much money it will be likely to save in future? That is based on the fact that, for the first several years under the changed scheme, there will be little difference between £21,000 as it was in 2012 and what it was in real terms.

Why are the Government pursuing a policy that will heavily penalise those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, go to university and then become high earners? Given that the Government's own consultation document has shown that it will be women, BME students and those with disabilities who will lose the most as a result of the policy, why have the Government still failed to publish an equality impact assessment? When can we expect them to do so?

The overall changes to how higher education is financed are basically worse for those who are from low-income backgrounds, because they need the maintenance loans alongside the tuition loans. Increasing their debt burden means that they will spend more and longer paying off their loans. Those from affluent backgrounds, who do not take out the maintenance and tuition loans, will not have that issue. Why, at a time when those from disadvantaged backgrounds are attending top universities in smaller and smaller numbers, are the Government pursuing a policy that will do little more than create a worrying disincentive for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who want to pursue higher education?

The changes to the fee repayment threshold will act as a disincentive to many, as will the increase in the student debt burden, especially when taken alongside the change from maintenance grants to loans.

Was the reason the Government did not announce the policy in the spending review that they knew at the time that it would be universally condemned? I agree with the Minister's recent comments that there has been a "worrying lack of progress" on widening participation in higher education. I share his conviction to "redouble our efforts" to boost social mobility. So can he please explain how breaking the trust of students and increasing their debt burden will achieve those laudable goals? Is it clear from the debate today that the measure will have the opposite effect. Given the new Prime Minister's words last week—about equality and bridging the gap—will the Minister reconsider that position today?

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, as colleagues will know, changes made in this Parliament to the Standing Orders allow the mover of a motion to speak for two or three minutes after the Minister has sat down. Helen Jones, would you like to do that?

Helen Jones indicated assent.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): You would. I call the Minister.

5.49 pm

The Minister for Universities and Science (Joseph Johnson): Thank you for your excellent chairing of this debate, Mr Pritchard. It is a pleasure to serve under your leadership. I am glad to have been reappointed in time to take part in this important debate and discuss the matter with the shadow Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner).

I recognise the sincerity and strength of feeling about this question among hon. Members and members of the taskforce that advised the previous Government, but I am sure they understand that my challenge as a Minister in the Department responsible for student and university finance is to ensure that our higher education system remains open to all and that our universities remain well funded. The hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who made an excellent opening speech, and other hon. Members have asked several important questions, which I will attempt to answer. However, I will first provide some strategic context to the decisions that the Government took in 2015.

When we reformed student finance in 2011, we put in place a progressive student loans system. Higher education is therefore accessible to all who have the potential to benefit from it, irrespective of their ability to pay. The system is working well and this Government have done more than any other to put higher education financing on a secure and sustainable footing. England has some of the finest universities in the world, and it is vital for our future economic prospects that they remain well funded. Total funding for the sector increased from £22 billion in 2009-10 to £28 billion in 2014-15, and it is forecast to reach £31 billion by 2017-18. We must ensure that our universities have the resources they need and every student has a high-quality experience during their time in higher education.

As the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) acknowledged, the warnings in the last Parliament that there would be a deterrent effect on student applications proved wrong. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds
are now going to university at a record rate—up from 13.6% in 2009 to around 18.5% in 2015. People from disadvantaged backgrounds are now 36% more likely to go to university than they were under the previous Labour Government.

**Helen Jones:** Can the Minister enlighten us about the position with the Russell Group universities?

**Joseph Johnson:** It is important that we make progress across our system. In the guidance that I sent to Les Ebdon, the director of fair access, in February this year—by the way, that was the first guidance that he had had in more than five years—I explicitly gave him strong political support to ensure that all institutions, including those that see themselves as the elite institutions in this country, do the heavy lifting on access and that people who have the capacity to benefit from education at Russell Group institutions get the chance to.

In Scotland, as the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) may be aware, controls on student numbers continue to stifle aspiration and opportunity in a way that is simply no longer the case in England because of the way that we have put our student finance system on a sustainable footing. He made several points in this respect. I steer him towards a recent statement by the Sutton Trust that

“Scottish 18 year olds from the most advantaged areas are still more than four times more likely to go straight to university than those from the least advantaged areas.”

By contrast, the figure in England is 2.4 times. I also point him to a statement by Audit Scotland, which says:

“It has become more difficult in recent years for Scottish students to gain a place at a Scottish university as applications have increased more than the number of offers made by universities.”

**Peter Grant:** I do not know whether the Minister is aware that the Scottish Government have committed themselves to ensuring that 20% of students in Scotland come from the 20% most deprived backgrounds by 2030. In other words, the Scottish Government have committed to doing away with that imbalance completely by 2030. May we be told what the UK Government’s equivalent commitment is?

**Joseph Johnson:** Certainly. We, too, are committed to increasing the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who go to university. As I said a moment ago, we in fact intend to double that proportion by 2030. In other words, the Scottish Government have committed to doing away with that imbalance completely by 2030. May we be told what the UK Government’s equivalent commitment is?

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for 12 weeks, until 14 October 2015, and we then undertook a full assessment of the equalities impact, in line with our obligations. The responses to the consultation, which I accept were often against the proposal, were analysed exceptionally carefully. On balance, the Government decided that it was fairer to ask graduates for a greater contribution to the costs of their study rather than to ask taxpayers to do so. The reasons for that are clear. Graduates benefit hugely from higher education. On average, graduate earnings are much higher than those of non-graduates. In 2015, graduates’ salaries averaged £31,500, compared with £22,000 for non-graduates. The threshold is still higher in real terms than the one we inherited from the Labour Government.

Paul Blomfield: A good attempt from the Minister, but does he not accept that he is missing the point? It is not a question of comparing the threshold he inherited; it is about the commitment made to students when they entered into their university degrees. Does he not accept the argument that it is a fraudulent practice to enter into an agreement on one set of terms, only for the Government then to change those terms completely? Would he accept that in relation to the purchase of a product he was making?

Joseph Johnson: Hon. Members made much the same point on many occasions throughout the debate, and I will come on to those arguments shortly.

Jonathan Lord: May I sympathise with the points made by the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield)? It is not just those on the Opposition Benches; those students affected have a lot of sympathy, certainly from me and, I hope, many of my colleagues, on the Government Benches, when it comes to the retrospective nature of these changes. As the Minister knows, I have had a heavy postbag from students for whom the goalposts have been changed and who are effectively due to pay a much higher interest rate than they could realistically have anticipated. I do not think that is right. We have heard eloquent speeches about the other challenges facing the younger members of society today. This is one area where we could help them out.

Joseph Johnson: I look forward to explaining shortly to my hon. Friend exactly why we took the decision and the reasons why we believe it was the right way forward to put our system on a sustainable footing and ensure that those students affected have a lot of sympathy, certainly from me and, I hope, many of my colleagues, on the Government Benches, when it comes to the retrospective nature of these changes. As the Minister knows, I have had a heavy postbag from students for whom the goalposts have been changed and who are effectively due to pay a much higher interest rate than they could realistically have anticipated. I do not think that is right. We have heard eloquent speeches about the other challenges facing the younger members of society today. This is one area where we could help them out.

Joseph Johnson: I reject the characterisation of our labour market as a failure. Clearly, when we look at the unemployment figures today, we cannot but be struck by the extent to which we have succeeded in getting many thousands more young people into work. The latest unemployment data from the ONS show 23.1 million people working full time, which is 300,000 more than even a year ago, let alone than in 2010. The percentage of young people out of work is now at a record low altogether.

Liz McInnes: While the Minister is quoting employment figures, will he tell us how many of those jobs are high-paid graduate jobs?

Joseph Johnson: Graduates from our universities do spectacularly well on the whole in moving into graduate employment. Obviously, we want variability across the system to even out and we want to ensure less patchiness in the system, but graduates do go into graduate employment on the whole.

The funding system put into place is also progressive. Interest rates after graduation increase with income, so that high earners repay more. For those earning £21,000 or less, the interest rate is set at RPI flat; the loan balance does not increase in real terms. For borrowers who earn more than that, the interest rate increases to a maximum of RPI plus 3%. It is only fair that borrowers who have benefited most from their education should repay the most back into the system.

Student loans are very different from a mortgage or credit card debt. Repayments are determined by income, not the amount borrowed. Borrowers are protected. If at any point their income drops, so do their repayments. Borrowers will repay only if they earn above the threshold.
and the loans are cancelled after 30 years, so many borrowers, as I said, will not repay the full amount. That is part of the taxpayers’ investment in our country’s skills base.

I recognise hon. Members’ concerns that students may not be fully aware of the terms and conditions of their loans at the time of application. The Student Loans Company does, however, provide students with a clear statement of the terms before the student completes their application for a loan. On page 3 of “Student loans—a guide to terms and conditions”, it states clearly—that this is not hidden in some small footprint—that “The regulations may change from time to time and this means the terms of your loan may also change. This guide will be updated to reflect any changes and it’s your responsibility to ensure you have the most up-to-date version.”

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the threshold freeze did not actually change the terms and conditions; it merely left them unchanged.

That information includes the way that interest will be applied and the repayment terms that will apply. Students are asked explicitly to confirm that they understand the information before they are granted the loan. All the information that the SLC provides to students is reviewed regularly to ensure that it is both accurate and accessible.

**Wes Streeting:** I have lost count of the number of times that iTunes has changed its terms and conditions, and I check the box and agree every time—more fool me, some might say. However, when the substance of the repayment conditions is written up in large print to entice students in but is open to change through the small print, surely that is not right. Even if the Government and the Student Loans Company took even greater steps to tell potential students that the terms and conditions could change, that is hardly a reassuring message to send to them, is it?

**Joseph Johnson:** There are always ways in which the Government can try to make things more explicit, but we cannot deny that on page 3 of the guide to terms and conditions students were clearly informed of the possibility that terms might change. In the event, they did not change—they were left unchanged, as I said.

Let me turn to the benefits of the freeze to the system and all the other reasons we felt it important to do what we did. A sustainable student finance system enabled us to abolish student number controls, lifting the cap on aspiration and enabling more people to receive the benefits of a university education. That is essential if we are to maintain our place as a country with a modern, highly skilled economy. Freezing the threshold means that we expect to recover £3.2 billion more of the loan outlay from existing borrowers. From future borrowers, we expect an additional £1 billion of repayments per £15 billion of loan outlay.

We send proportionately fewer people to university to study at undergraduate level than our main competitors. Between now and 2022, more than half of job vacancies will be in occupations most likely to employ graduates. If we are to continue to grow our economy, we must equip our young people with the skills and qualifications they need to fill those roles. England is not unique in grappling with those problems, but we are one of the few countries to have found a sustainable solution. That has been recognised internationally; the OECD has praised the student loan system in England as that of “one of the few countries to have figured out a sustainable approach to higher education finance”.

I recognise the strength of feeling there is on the issue, but the Government must balance the interests of students, who benefit from higher education, with those of general taxpayers. We have taken difficult decisions, but in the process we have underpinned the financial sustainability of our student funding system in a manner that means we can lift student number controls and enable proportionately more young people than ever before to benefit from university.

6.11 pm

**Helen Jones:** I had hoped for a more encouraging reply from the Minister, because he is generally a decent soul, but his reply showed that he just does not get it. We have heard about the impact on poorer students, on women and on those from ethnic minorities. Most of all, we have heard about the impact on trust in politics and the Government. The Minister has told us that the Government have not changed the terms and conditions, and that is absolutely true; but the Government have gone back on what they told students. He says we want a system that is open for all, but at the moment our most prestigious universities are open to all in the same way that the Ritz hotel is. He has not tackled that. He will not give us the figures for poorer students going to the most prestigious universities. He has admitted that the Government got themselves into trouble on this issue, because average earnings did not rise as much as they hoped they would. In other words, their economic policy is at fault.

As for the system being sustainable, all the evidence shows that it is in real trouble. It is not going to be sustainable in the long term or deliver what students want, or what the country wants, which is an opportunity for every young person, wherever they come from, to go to the university that is right for them—not the cheapest or the nearest—and for universities to admit them. Despite the talk of meritocracy, we do not have a meritocracy—unless we believe that those who are better off are automatically cleverer than other people; because in our system at the moment, people are less likely to go to a prestigious university if they are poor. I hoped that the Minister would be able to respond to those concerns today. Sadly, he has not. Students and their parents will note that.

**Question put and agreed to.**

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 131167 relating to changes to the student loans agreement.

6.13 pm

**Sitting adjourned.**
Westminster Hall
Tuesday 19 July 2016

[GRAHAM STRINGER in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS
Persecution of Religious Minorities: Middle East

9.30 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered persecution of religious minorities in the Middle East and its effect on the UK.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank all hon. Members who have made the effort to come to Westminster Hall on such a lovely day. I am pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), in her place and look forward to her contribution. I congratulate the Minister on his elevation to his new post and very much look forward to his response to the debate. When he held other ministerial posts, we held him in high esteem. We still do, and we look forward to hearing a comprehensive response, like those he has given us previously in reply to other matters.

The persecution of religious minorities in the middle east and its effect on the UK is a massive issue. It is one that we are greatly concerned about and one that we want to debate fully. I speak as chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, in the knowledge that this human right—a right for all—is key to stability in the middle east. I shall talk about that freedom in the middle east and the effect on the UK. I make this speech very much on behalf of my Christian brothers and sisters who live in the middle east. They have been persecuted over many years and their numbers have been greatly reduced. Other Members present will be aware of that and may wish to address it in their contributions.

While we watch, and are deeply saddened by, the recent horrific terrorist attacks that have rocked the world—in Nice, Dhaka, Medina, Baghdad and Istanbul, among other places—we must continue to bear in mind those throughout the middle east whose lives have been radically changed forever. We think especially of people in Syria and Iraq. In Syria, 1 million Christians have been displaced and dispersed all over the world. Just on Sunday past, I was talking to a gentleman from Canada who told me that Canada has taken in 30,000 Syrians, many of them Christians. Other countries around the world have also taken in Syrians. Many of those 30,000 will never return home; they will be settled in Canada and wish never to go back to their home country.

We are very aware of the situation in Iraq, which is one of those countries in which Christians are a small minority. Where do they feature in an Iraq where Christians are attacked or murdered and their churches destroyed? They are under a lot of pressure when it comes to education and employment. The Iraq displacement tracking matrix found that, between January 2014 and 22 June 2016, there were more than 3.3 million internally displaced individuals—more than 550,000 families—dispersed across 100 districts in Iraq. Such has been the impact of the persecution of Christians and religious minorities in the middle east. I shall also discuss other religious minorities, because so many people are displaced and/or under pressure.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate on an issue that is so very important, not only to us parliamentarians and the wider community, but to Christian communities in the middle east. Does he agree that we would like the Minister to say in his response that the Government will utilise all their diplomatic and trade links to protect religious minorities from persecution?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. He has raised the very important point that we need to adhere to that 0.7% commitment. Does he hope that the Government will continue to adhere to that principle?

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Alongside the aid that will go to the countries and whatever trade agreement is established, there needs to be an agreement on the persecution of Christians, and if that is breached or infringed, there needs to be a proper investigation and those found guilty need to be held to account.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for those salient words. It is important to make sure that any trade or assistance given through DFID or by other means is subject to accountability. It is good to have that on the record.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate, which I know many of my constituents are following closely. Does he agree that the UK can use its authority to ensure that there is respect for human rights and for political and civil rights in Syria, Iraq and the wider middle east? We must ensure that enforcement of the international covenant on civil and political rights is seen as a fundamental that we expect to be upheld in countries to which we are offering aid and support.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for those wise words. That is exactly what this debate is about: the opportunity to consider human rights in the countries to which she referred and throughout the middle east. We will mention some others in the course of the debate.
Persecution of Religious Minorities: Middle East

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way—he is being most generous—and congratulate him warmly on securing this important debate. Does he agree that we need to know the extent of the problem in terms of people coming to the UK? Is he aware that the Home Office does not compile statistics on claims for asylum on the basis of religious persecution? Does he agree that we should perhaps consider doing so?

Jim Shannon: I shall address that issue later in my speech. The all-party group of which I am chair recently published a report called “Fleeing Persecution: Asylum Claims in the UK on Religious Freedom Grounds”, which contains lots of information. In it, we make 10 salient points that we feel are important. We will hold a meeting with the new Minister to discuss these matters and ensure that those points are taken on board. I am sure that other hon. Members will speak to them later in the debate as well.

Weak governance in Syria and Iraq has left societies in which violent terrorist groups wreak havoc and implement their own rule of law and punishments, in blatant violation of international human rights standards and law. Although it is not a legally binding statement, last month the UN commission of inquiry on Syria determined that Daesh is committing genocide against Yazidis. The commission also found that Daesh’s abuse of Yazidis—a small ethnically Kurdish religious community—amounts to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I am sure he would agree that Daesh’s archaic interpretation of sharia law permits the enslavement of non-Muslim women and children. Such enslavement has been suffered by Yazidi people, as well as others. Treating people as the spoils of war is a war crime. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in calling on the Minister to ensure that the UK plays its part in making sure that evidence is available so that the International Criminal Court can bring rapists and enslavers to justice?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady feels, as we all do, very passionately about the Yazidis and the terrible crimes, brutality and violence that have been carried out among them. We will have the opportunity to speak about that; I intend to discuss it later in my speech.

We had a number of meetings, and the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and, I think, some other Members were present. One could not fail to be moved by the stories that were heard—they were heart-wrenching and would have made a grown man cry. Many of us did shed tears for those who are under threat, face discrimination or, indeed, fight for their lives.

But it is not just the Yazidis who are suffering; it is the ancient religious communities, including the Syriac Catholics, the Mandaeans, the Baha’is, the Shi’as and Sunnis alike, the few remaining Jews in the area, the Protestants and the non-religious individuals as well. All their sacred sites are in danger of being wiped out. Less than a third of the 1.5 million Christians who were in Iraq in 2003 now remain. Looking at Iraq, the numbers have decreased dramatically—they are down to something like 250,000. And what about the destruction of all those ancient monuments and sites, and the destruction and burning of the ancient books that hold centuries of information? They destroy them all with a blatant disregard for how important they are.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He talks about the destruction of the heritage. His motion is, of course, about the impact here in the UK, so does he agree that as well as fighting the discrimination and standing up for the minorities we—our heritage organisations, our museums and so on—have a responsibility to find ways of preserving the heritage and the areas that have been destroyed, and of commemorating that here in the UK?

Jim Shannon: That is absolutely right. In fairness, the Government have made some movement towards doing that. The Minister might be able to respond on that point. I think there are steps afoot to ensure that some of the monuments can be restored and some money sent that way to make it happen.

I would like to put on the record thanks to many organisations—I hope I do not leave any of them out. They are the churches from my area that support the middle east physically, practically and prayerfully, Release International, which does great work with Christians, Open Doors, which works in Christian solidarity worldwide, the Barnabas Fund, and the Elim charities that work on behalf of Christians across the whole middle east.

I mentioned other ethnic minority groups. The Baha’i is in Iraq and Iran are subjected to unbelievable discrimination and hatred by those in positions of power. Let us look across the cauldron of the middle east and think of all the countries that are there. Indeed, eight of the 12 worst countries for persecution of Christians listed in a report by Open Doors are in the middle east. That is a list that no one wants to be in, because those are the places where persecution is more rife, rampant and deliberate. The right to freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right that nearly all the countries across the middle east have ratified and have made a commitment to uphold, but the reality is very different, with lots of lip service being paid.

When one group of individuals is discriminated against or persecuted on the basis of its religion or belief, that often signals conditions in which all but the deemed orthodox are oppressed and persecuted for their beliefs by the Government and/or non-state actors. Clearly, we must focus on those countries in the middle east that have ratified the fundamental human rights—referred to by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green)—but where we do not see much evidence of that ratification. Let us have evidence from those countries that have committed themselves to human rights freedoms—unfortunately, they do not always follow through.

Plurality of religion and belief is a crucial ingredient for a stable society, and the Foreign Office recognises that in its pledges for UN Human Rights Council membership from 2017 and in its current human rights structure, where the freedom of religion or belief team is housed under the human rights for a stable world stream. Last year the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief participated in a conference in New York, which almost 100 delegates from some
65 countries across the world attended. That was an opportunity for all those people to come together. In this House we come together as groups, and we encouraged similar groups from other countries across the world to come together, including from Canada, the United States, south America, Africa, the middle east, the far east and some of the eastern countries of Europe.

In countries where freedom of religion or belief is systematically violated, societal tension and violence frequently follow, leading to a more polarised society, with individuals retreating into their dogmas. Let us focus, again, on the group of which I am chair. The group had the chance to carry out an inquiry and produce a booklet on Pakistan and on how freedom of religious belief is looked upon there. The more we look at Pakistan, the more we feel for our Christian brothers and sisters and for other ethnic and religious minorities there. I know that the Minister has read the report, and I appreciate the time he has taken to do so in preparation for the debate. From a job and an education point of view, those who adhere to a religion outside the norm are the lowest of all the castes there are in Pakistan. The booklet, which we produced just last year, is another indication of why we need to look more deeply at Pakistan, Iran and Iraq.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is obviously right to focus on the middle east—indeed, he is talking about Pakistan and Iran. Is it also worth remembering, however, that a significant number of religious minorities who come to Europe—to this country—continue some of those battles here on home soil, and that we also need to keep an eye on that? I was struck by something that happened when I was in a school classroom in Marylebone five or six years ago. I was already being told that Shi’a and Sunni Muslim schoolchildren were ganging up against each other in the playground. We have to recognise that a lot of the problems may be transported closer to home.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Gentleman brings a salient point into the debate. Yes, we need to be aware of that. We need to be aware of integration into society and of how we can do it well. We also need to be aware of the problems that come off the back of that.

When working with partners in the middle east, it is crucial that we discuss means for individuals to be free within their own nation’s context to manifest their religion or belief and that we build and implement action plans for each context. Although traditionally less of a focus in political and diplomatic discussion, long-term strategies that integrate lessons from the past, must be encouraged and supported in Iraq and Syria and across the whole region. I look forward to the Minister’s response on that. To truly secure human rights and restore long-term peace, not just emergency responses but a long game and a considered perspective are necessary.

As chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, I encourage DFID—the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) referred to this as well—to be sensitive to the complexities that religion brings, particularly to political action, which in many cases is contradictory to international law, that people use religion to justify. Even in the recent Turkish coup, we saw turmoil used as an opportunity to target and attack churches in Trabzon and Malatya. Using that and countless other incidents across the middle east to dismiss religion as too tricky and to determine that it is the main cause of violence and wrongdoing is simplistic. The underlying political motives must be recognised and tackled.

Let us just look at the coup in Turkey. The coup is over, but many, looking from the outside in, will say, “Is this a chance to suppress human rights in Turkey?” Many of us feel that it could well be a chance to clamp down on all opposition. Is that what we want? Is it what should be happening? No, it is not. Is Turkey a safe place for religious groups at this moment in time? The evidence says that it is not.

Julian Knight: Will the hon. Gentleman also reflect on the fact that Turkey’s Government used to be very secular and that there are now many disturbing indications that religion is being used as a battering ram to bring about intolerance within society to help the political elites?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We all would concur with what he said, and we thank him for his intervention and for reminding us.

It is good sometimes to look where the story is beyond the headline stories and the media. The real story of Turkey is suppression, the denial of human rights and deliberate discrimination against other ethnic and religious groups. We have to look beyond the 6,000 people who have been arrested and the coup that failed because people did not want it and turn our attention to what will happen off the back of it.

The Department for International Development already works with faith communities to eradicate poverty, but I urge it to ensure that, where aid is provided or contracts are awarded overseas, those things are channelled to civil society organisations and Government programmes that can demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of freedom of religion or belief and how their work will have a positive rather than a negative impact. That will not only help DFID’s November 2015 strategic objective to strengthen global peace, security and governance but will help achieve sustainable development goal 16, which is to secure peace, security and global justice.

The all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief this year brought out another document entitled “Fleeing Persecution: Asylum Claims in the UK on Religious Freedom Grounds”, which I intend to speak about, because the motion we are debating is about the “persecution of religious minorities in the Middle East and its effect on the UK.”

We need to look at how we can help influence what is happening in the middle east and best ensure that those coming here also have the opportunity to have their freedom.

Kate Green: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Home Office’s approach to applications for asylum from some of these persecuted minorities is crass and clumsy? There is a need for much greater training of Home Office staff so that simplistic approaches to assessing whether people have suffered religious persecution are abandoned and so that we have a much subtler approach.
understanding of the trauma and why people might find it difficult when they apply to express what happened to them.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is very much tuned into the report, because it says that. Before the debate started, I spoke to the Minister and made him aware of the 10 points that we asked to be considered. I do not want to trivialise the work that the Home Office does on asylum seekers, but some of the questions are almost a Bible trivia quiz. People are asked, “Can you tell us the books of the New Testament?” or, “Can you tell us the names of the 12 apostles?” Let us be honest: some of us in this room might be challenged to do that.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am not going to give you the names of all 12 apostles, Mr Stringer. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. Friend for giving way. What he is saying reminded me of “The West Wing” episode “Shibboleth”, in which persecuted minorities wanted to go to the United States from China, and President Bartlet brought one of them in and challenged them, and they got the question right. That ignores the fact that there is also cultural persecution, not because of someone’s personal and strong faith but because they are identified with a greater collective community. The questions are completely erroneous and do not touch the heart of the persecution that people suffer for their family or community connections or the fear that they have.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for focusing on that issue.

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): May I just allay some of the fears? I asked some questions, and in assessing claims based on religious persecution, caseworkers are expected to ask appropriate and sensitive questions based on an understanding of religious concepts and forms of religious persecution. Where the credibility of a conversion to a particular faith needs to be established, an interview is far more an exploration of a claimant’s personal experiences and journey to their new faith in their country and the UK than it is a test of religious facts, such as, “Name the ten commandments.” Those are not the sorts of questions we are asking.

Jim Shannon: If things have changed, that is good, but the evidence so far indicates that perhaps they have not. I am being respectful. We have asked for a meeting about this issue, and I hope we will have it with the appropriate Minister. I think that is the Minister who is here today, now he is in place. We look forward to having the opportunity to develop the 10 points we raised with our inquiry. They indicate that some things need to be put right.

Mark Field: We all have a great passion for the idea that there is terrible religious persecution across the world, but it is legitimate for any immigration authority, which is the Home Office here, to recognise that a minority of people—a small minority, but none the less a minority—will try to use persecution as a means of getting in when that is not justified. To have a process in place is entirely legitimate from a Home Office point of view.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Gentleman is right that there needs to be a process. We are not saying that there should not be a process; we are saying that it needs to be effective and to take into account the trauma of those who have been persecuted. It needs to reflect an understanding of the circumstances and why they are here. It is about how we do that in a compassionate way that gets the answers to the necessary questions and enables that person, whoever they may be, to apply for asylum and be granted it.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that the fact that these questions are being asked is a clear indication that the person asking the questions does not understand the essence of what it is to be a Christian, a Muslim or a Jew? None of those things are about memorising facts. Is it not the case that his all-party group’s inquiry also found evidence that sometimes the person asking the questions had to google the answers half an hour before the interview took place?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman has given some examples that he is aware of, and I thank him for that.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way once again. This debate and this issue in particular raise article 9 of the Human Rights Act. In that regard, does he agree that the championing and protection of human rights in the UK are vital if we are to protect those same values in other countries, particularly in the middle east?

Jim Shannon: All the hon. Lady’s interventions have been applicable to the issues, and I thank her for that. It gives us a focus. I am conscious of time, Mr Stringer, so I will try to head on.

Despite the systematic persecution of religious or belief groups in Iraq—some expert bodies think that the situation with the Yazidis amounts to genocide—I think that, too, as do many others in the House—the UK’s Gateway, Children at Risk and Mandate resettlement schemes have helped only a few hundred in the past year or so. While some Iraqis may fit all the criteria under the current Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, they are not eligible for asylum in the UK because they are not Syrian nationals.

The all-party group that I chair is urgently calling for a modest expansion of the Syrian scheme to create an Iraqi vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. That would permit Iraqis who fit the current vulnerability criteria and are recommended by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to be made eligible for asylum in the UK. That would be a small change and a small number, but it would be a significant move that would enable those subject to persecution to have an opportunity. In the wake of the Chilcot report, the UK cannot absolve itself from assisting Iraqis. Prioritising Iraqis alongside Syrians for resettlement in the UK is the least we can do. Daesh does not discriminate depending on whether individuals are Iraqi or Syrian, and neither should we.
Finally, the all-party group’s latest report, “Fleeing Persecution: Asylum Claims in the UK on Religious Freedom Grounds”, which I referred to a few moments ago, highlights what happens when individuals who have been persecuted for their religion or belief reach the UK and claim asylum, and the lack of understanding and misperceptions of religion and belief among decision makers working in the UK asylum system. We are trying to be constructive. We are not pointing the finger or trying to be nasty. We want to point out where constructive changes could be made to help the system and those people who have every cause to be here and can no longer live in their own country. In religious persecution cases, Home Office caseworkers have often based their decision on whether an asylum seeker is genuine on quick internet searches, as the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) said, on informal staff-made crib sheets and, in the case of Christians, on Bible trivia questions including, “What colour is the Bible?” It could be black, white or red. Does it matter what colour it is, for goodness’ sake? What is in the Bible is what matters. The word that it contains is the important issue. I sometimes wonder how these things happen. Such methods limit the capacity to differentiate between individuals who are genuinely part of a religious community facing persecution and those who have learnt the “correct” answers, as has already been referred to. Misinterpretation also plays a large role in the errors occurring in such cases. I urge the Home Office to recognise its genuine shortcomings and equip itself with well-trained staff and suitable translators to ensure a fair hearing of all cases.

I hope that the Minister agrees with the importance of addressing persecution in the middle east in both short and long-term strategies so that we in this House can, in conjunction with our partners abroad, secure the most stable world possible.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I intend to call the Front-Bench people to sum up at 10.30. There are three people standing; the arithmetic is straightforward.

10 am

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate, and for his faithfulness in highlighting the issue in this place over some years.

The most recent report from Aid to the Church in Need, “Persecuted and Forgotten?”, which analyses persecution in 22 countries, notes a serious deterioration since its previous report in 2013 of a deepening cycle of persecution. It states:

“The vast exodus of Christians from Syria, Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East highlights the very real possibility that Christianity could soon all but disappear from much of its ancient homeland.”

It states that the cause is in large part “the product of an ethnic cleansing motivated by religious hatred.”

The actions of Daesh, which have acted tragically to instil a fear of genocide, do not just impact on Christians, as we know, but have affected many other groups: Shi’a and Sunni Muslims, Mandaean, Yazidis, Baha’is, Kurds and others. What should be our response to the suffering of those people? I want to briefly address three points.

First, we should speak out. Holding a debate such as this is valuable because it tells our brothers and sisters who are persecuted for their faiths that they are not forgotten. But we need to do more. Secondly, we need to work together with others, particularly internationally, for the religious freedom of those who suffer persecution.

Thirdly, we need to work for justice and ensure that the actions of the perpetrators are stopped and that they are brought to justice. I want to speak briefly about those three issues.

First, on speaking out, here in Westminster Hall at the end of June we held the national prayer breakfast, which 740 community leaders from all over the country attended. The theme was the Church in the middle east and the aim was to highlight the concerns about persecution there. It was notable that 150 parliamentarians attended, the most of any national prayer breakfast. That highlights the concern that colleagues in this place have about this issue.

The keynote speaker was Bishop Angaelos, head of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the UK. He spoke powerfully about the importance of the role that we all have to play in speaking out honestly and graciously to express our concerns. He called for us to work together. He said:

“Christians in the Middle East are indigenous people and reject minority status. They see themselves as intrinsic members, and indigenous peoples...We need to address the reality of this situation...there has been a systemic, yet gradual prejudice, marginalisation and alienation of Christians and minorities allowed to continue over decades. This does not have to continue on our watch...We must realise that the current situation is greater than us all; it needs us all to work together...There can no longer be a concept of ‘over there’ because families of those affected in the Middle East are members of your constituencies, our Churches, and our society as a whole...We are one very large community...our paths cross, our experience is one and our journey is one that we must share. Regardless of which House one sits in, which Church one worships in, or...which faith one does or does not have, we must work together for the freedom and dignity of human life and speak with a collaborative voice.”

He particularly emphasised the oneness of the human family and how there is no more space for a “Muslim East” and a “Christian West”. He emphasised how we are now all members of a global community; our world is now intertwined. What happens in each part affects all the others and we must promote human dignity, equality and respect.

The speech was powerful; many in the room were deeply moved and looked to how they could take forward their responsibility in this respect. I shall now briefly touch on how the UK could work with others.

The United States Secretary of State, John Kerry, said:

“Daesh is responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control, including Yazidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims.”

He has focused on the need for global attention to deal with the plight of religious minorities, particularly in Iraq and Syria. He has challenged the world to “find the resources to help those harmed by these atrocities.”

Knox Thames, who has been appointed by him, has within the past few days put out a call, together with the ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom in the US, David Saperstein, and they are convening a conference on 29 July at the State Department in the US, entitled “Threats to religious and ethnic minorities under Daesh”. The purpose of the meeting will be to advance intergovernmental efforts to protect religious minorities in Iraq and Syria and to discuss with the international community what additional actions can
be taken to help ensure a future for religious diversity. More than 20 countries will be represented, many at ambassadorial or head of department level.

Liz Saville Roberts: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way because I want to raise a point that I fear may not otherwise come up. I am sure she shares my concern that encrypted messaging services such as WhatsApp and Telegram are being used to sell Yazidi and other non-Muslim women as sex slaves alongside weapons and pets. One message shared with a Daesh group carried the description:

“Virgin. Beautiful. 12 years old...Her price has reached $12,500 and she will be sold soon.”

This is an area where every step must be taken not just to hasten the rescue of these women, but to ensure that the global digital platforms that are being used to carry out these atrocities are held to account and that this is prevented. There is a global role in this.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Lady makes a very pertinent point. The Yazidis have suffered particularly in this respect. The younger the girl, tragically, the more valuable the price extorted.

Will Her Majesty's Government be participating in the conference organised by the US State Department on 29 July? Will the Minister ensure that we are indeed represented and that a report is brought back?

On ensuring that we work for justice for those who are oppressed, I will refer back to the debate on 20 April that has already been mentioned today. In that debate on the actions of Daesh as genocide, I called on the Government to make an immediate referral to the UN Security Council with a view to conferring jurisdiction upon the International Criminal Court so that the perpetrators could be brought to justice. Time inhibits my referring to everything mentioned in that debate, but we heard that girls as young as eight were raped; that a two-year-old boy had been killed and his body parts ground down and fed to his mother; and that mothers were seeing their own children crucified. No one could deny that these atrocities are genocide. Executions, mass graves, assassination of church leaders, crucifixions, systematic rapes, torture of men, women and children, beheadings—there are so many acts of violence that the evil seems fictional and medieval. Yet, despite the vote that day in the House of Commons—279 to nil in favour of the motion calling on the Government to refer Daesh’s genocidal atrocities to the UN Security Council—still no referral has been made.

The new Foreign Secretary, in an article in The Daily Telegraph on 27 March 2016, said that Daesh

“are engaged in what can only be called genocide of the poor Yazidis (though for some baffling reason the Foreign Office still hesitates to use the term genocide).”

The debate called on the Government to ensure that the unanimous will of Parliament was implemented. It was not. Now that we have a Foreign Secretary who has made such a clear statement of his view that Daesh’s actions against the persecuted constitute genocide, will the Government register the referral that has been requested by a unanimous vote of Parliament, with the UN Security Council, so that action in the international community can be accelerated to bring the perpetrators to justice? We know that recognition of genocide brings with it obligations on the part of the international community to prevent, punish and protect.

Finally, I ask all colleagues in the House to sign early-day motion 346 on the recognition of genocide by Daesh, which I placed in the Table Office yesterday. It expresses profound concern that our Government have still not called upon the UN Security Council to take such action.
Committee recently noted, many refugees, particularly Christians, avoid refugee camps out of fear of persecution, and so, many vulnerable people may not even be considered for resettlement—as refugees in host communities are less visible to relevant authorities. We, as an international community, need more creative solutions to assist those people, although that is not to say that those in refugee camps are not also vulnerable and in need of refuge. In this country, our response should include a modest extension of our current Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme.

The House recently unanimously voted to describe what is being done to Yazidis, Christians and other religious minorities in Iraq and Syria as "genocide at the hands of Daesh".

Estimates put the number of Yazidis in Iraq at between 500,000 and 700,000, with the vast majority concentrated in northern Iraq, in and around Sinjar. In Syria, the number of Yazidis is estimated to be a tenth of that. Despite the fact that the majority of Yazidis in the region are overwhelmingly Iraqi, they are not eligible for the VPRS, simply because they do not live in Syria.

In 2015, 102 Iraqi refugees were resettled under the Gateway protection programme and four under the Mandate scheme and 216 grants of asylum or other forms of protection, at initial decision, were given to Iraqi nationals. In contrast, official statistics show that, by the end of March 2016, nearly 1,900 Syrians had been resettled under the VPRS in the UK, including 1,602 who arrived since October 2015. The current levels of resettlement in the UK provide persecuted Iraqi minorities considerably lower levels of protection than Syrians. That is a simple fact, and it is particularly disconcerting given that Syrian and Iraqi minorities have both suffered from Daesh. The former can qualify as part of the 20,000 that the previous Prime Minister spoke of. To be consistent and fair as a country, as part of the 20,000 that the previous Prime Minister himself drew no distinction between either side of the "line in the sand" between Iraq and Syria. Indeed, this Parliament determined, in its decision on air strikes in Syria, that if Daesh were not respecting that line in the sand, neither should we in our counter-extremism tactics. We need to respond to that inconsistency in the existing VPRS.

Whatever people's view of the decision in 2003—personally, I was opposed to the war in Iraq at the time—we have a continuing responsibility to the sovereign state of Iraq. The UK should not absolve itself of responsibility, especially given the recent Chilcot finding that the UK decision to embark on the programme of de-Ba'athification and the demobilisation of the Iraqi army exacerbated sectarian divisions, contributing to many of the problems in Iraq today. Making Iraqis eligible for resettlement through a modest extension of the VPRS is an appropriate and modest response, and entirely consistent with the decent man that I know the Minister to be.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate.

Religion causes all wars. We have heard that, have we not? A throwaway comment at a dinner table, or something overheard in a conversation? It is historical nonsense. It is a calumny of the highest order. Economics and doctrine, and their perversion, have been the root of most wars in the past 100 years, in our experience. The second world war was not caused by religion. In the first world war, religion had a marginal impact, perhaps in the tertiary areas of the conflict zone. In the 16th century, even the French wars of religion did not have all that much to do with religion.

The reality is that religion, which is about hope and about people trying to find a path through life and a way, with their loved ones, to a truth that they can believe in, is being used for the darkest of all possible purposes. It is, in effect, being perverted in the most extreme circumstances. It is being used to hang other issues on.

What we are experiencing in the world, however, is perhaps also a result of the 24-hour news culture, with this thing in our faces all the time, making us much more aware of the daily tragedies going on in the world. Furthermore, persecution on religious grounds seems to be more acute now than at any time in living memory, perhaps going back even beyond the Armenian genocide at the time of the first world war. Religion has become the basis for, or a means of bringing about, conflict, replacing conventional war, which has been put aside.

Given the changing nature of conflict, it is important for us as a sovereign, democratic and just society to stand up and say when we believe that something is terribly wrong. Therefore, what has happened to the Yazidi people in Iraq and beyond, and the Christians, is genocide. That is clear, and we absolutely should be saying so as a nation.

What do we do, apart from using that word and calling something genocide, rightly to force a programme on those who are indulging in such abominable acts? When Robin Cook was Foreign Secretary, we had an "ethical foreign policy", which seemed to have a hint of post-imperial angst about it. To me, an ethical foreign policy should be one in which we link our aid and
Julian Knight: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. He is absolutely right that we should be looking at religious persecution as a cause of poverty, displacement and many other degrees of suffering. Does he agree that if DFID did so, and looked more carefully at it as such a cause, we could prevent, down the line, a great deal of not only suffering, but humanitarian aid expenditure by the international community?

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point, which returns to what I was saying about how the countries that indulge in such activities are actually bad investments. In effect, they are proving themselves to be unworthy of the aid that we are giving them. We need to be thoughtful about exactly how economically engaged we are with those countries.

In Turkey, we have seen increasing intolerance. Under Atatürk, the formation of modern Turkey was about a secular society—religion still played an enormous part in society, but the governance of Turkey was secular. It is now moving away from that and, too, hanging on to religion some of the darker elements in that society. We have to be very aware of that in an important neighbour on our doorstep. In 1999 or 2000, I think, when we were looking at the crisis in the Balkans, we were saying, “Isn’t it horrific that this goes on on Europe’s borders?” but Turkey is on Europe’s borders as well. We should be thinking about that in connection with our sphere of influence.

To conclude, we need to consider the APPG report. When we deal with individuals—after all, this is about individuals—we have to be much more thoughtful and better trained in how we do so. The better statistics help, so that we know the reasons why people are coming to this country—are they fleeing religious persecution?—as does better training for Home Office and UK Border Force personnel, in particular to assess whether an asylum seeker is a victim of religious persecution.

I imagine that it can be difficult for people to speak up, especially if they are members of a minority and have had to hide their religious light under a bushel. When they come to another country, the person they are seeing is not only in a uniform—perhaps not the reassuring figure that we might see, but a threat and authority—but someone from whom they would have kept things quiet, and now they are having to open up, often in a foreign language, and in a completely alien environment. I understand how people might find that incredibly difficult and their silence might be perceived as something different. We need to spend time with such individuals, and we need to support our staff to do so, in order to help all such people not only in our country, but in the camps, close to the conflict zones.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Before I call Peter Grant, I assume that the proposer would like two minutes at the end of the Minister’s speech.

Jim Shannon indicated assent.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I call Peter Grant.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Thank you very much, Mr Stringer. I am pleased to be able to take part in the debate. Not for the first time, particularly in Westminster Hall debates, I am struck by the agreement and unanimity around the Chamber. I think that we have heard speeches or interventions from Members of six different parties—apologies if there have been more and I have missed any.

We are agreed that the world is facing genocide. That should strike at the hearts of us all. It does not matter whether it is happening on the borders of Europe, the borders of Asia or the borders of London; when our fellow human beings are being persecuted as mercilessly and brutally as the Yazidis, Christians and other minorities are, we should all feel the pain and we should all resolve to give them whatever help we can and not to allow the climate in other parts of the world to continue to evolve so such persecution happens again. Earlier this year, as we always do in January, we commemorated the holocaust with the words, “Never again,” but what are we doing to prevent the climate of hate, fear and ignorance that allows holocausts and genocide to be perpetrated again and again from being allowed to develop in the first place?

I commend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) not only for securing the debate but for the work that he and others have done to remind us that persecution, which in fact used to be described as martyrdom, is happening in several parts of the world. We are talking today primarily about the middle east, but the majority of cases in which it is established that Christians were murdered because of their faith are actually happening in parts of Africa. However bad persecution in the middle east is in numerical terms, there are other parts of the world in which it is as bad or worse.

I think that history will show that what Daesh is doing is on a par with what the Nazis did in occupied Europe. The numbers may not get quite as horrifically high, but I think that Daesh’s brutality and dehumanisation of human beings will be proven to be every bit as horrific and evil. That is why the United Kingdom Government and other Governments should not hesitate to say, “This is a genocide, it will be treated as a genocide, and the perpetrators will be pursued to the ends of the earth and brought to justice”—not by a court that owes its legitimacy or sovereignty to an individual nation state but by the court of the world: the International Criminal Court. These are crimes against humanity, and it is both the right and the responsibility of all humanity to ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice.
As was mentioned earlier, where a climate of persecution is allowed to arise, religion is often used as an excuse, and it always has been. The massive upheaval that these nations saw in the 17th and 18th centuries was supposedly about religion, but it was not. It was about different tribes—essentially, different dynasties or political parties—fighting over power, but it was always presented as a war about which kind of Christian should sit on the throne. That is not a new phenomenon.

I do not know of any major world religion that instructs or even permits its followers to kill innocent human beings simply for being different, and if anyone can contradict me, I would be interested to know. I am a Christian, and there is nothing in the Christian faith that allows anyone to commit the crime of murder against an innocent person. If anything, Islam is even clearer: the taking of innocent life is not permitted under any circumstances. As well as being crimes against humanity, the atrocities that Daesh is committing are among the worst crimes that can be committed against the Islamic faith.

Patrick Grady: Just about all the religions that have been mentioned have in their scripture or teaching the golden rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” That is not trite; it should be fundamental to the way we all live our lives. Perhaps if that rule were respected a bit more, there would be less need for such debates.

Peter Grant: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. It is important that as part of the healing process, victims are helped to understand that the people who persecuted them—those who raped them or murdered their families—were not acting in the name of Islam, Christianity or any other faith. If they were acting in the name of any ideology at all, it was the ideology of Satanism—the ideology of pure evil. For victims to understand that helps the healing process, and it also helps in the very difficult task of ensuring that victims are not left with a lifelong feeling of anger or hatred towards others from the religious community that they hold responsible for their ill treatment.

Kate Green: I very much agree with what the hon. Gentleman is saying. The debate is in part about the effect of persecution in the middle east on this country. Does he agree that in a climate in this country in which my Muslim and other constituents are reporting a rise in hatred and abuse directed at them because of their faith and ethnic background, it is important for the UK Government and authorities as clearly and often as possible to make exactly the point that he is making: that these acts are not carried out in the name of Islam or any faith?

Peter Grant: I am grateful for that intervention. I do not know whether the hon. Lady has been sneaking a look at my notes over my shoulder, but I am going to come to that point. To be honest, I am sometimes uncomfortable with that line of argument about the impact that persecution in the middle east has in the United Kingdom. We all have a responsibility to speak out and act against that persecution, regardless of whether it threatens anything about our way of life on these islands. It is more important to look at the impact that the United Kingdom can have on areas in which genocide and persecution are happening, and whether what happens in these nations is creating a climate that makes such horrors more or less likely in future. I must say that as an example of a tolerant, pluralist society, we do not do anything like as well as we sometimes like to think we do.

Our approach must be founded on significant humility and shame about what has been allowed to happen on these islands in the name of good government, not just back in the middle ages but much more recently. I have mentioned before in a Westminster Hall debate that within my lifetime, a magazine was criminally prosecuted in a United Kingdom court for printing a poem that was deemed to be offensive to Christians. I personally found that poem offensive, but that is no ground to threaten to throw someone in jail. Within my lifetime, citizens of the United Kingdom have had to flee their homes in fear because of persecution and harassment from their neighbours for following the wrong religious tradition, and there were jobs that people were not allowed to take if they were of the wrong religion. We might like to think that we have moved on from those days, but we have not moved on that far and we did not move on that long ago. When we look at other parts of the world where intolerance has grown to extreme levels, let us not forget our own often shameful recent past.

In specific reference to the comment by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), what does anyone think was the impact on tolerance and understanding when a newspaper complained recently that Channel 4 had the temerity to allow a Muslim woman to report on a terrorist attack? What effect on understanding and tolerance does anyone think could possibly have been created when one of the United Kingdom’s highest paid newspaper columnists wrote an article suggesting that the celebration of Ramadan was somehow a threat to our peace and security?

We cannot afford to be silent about this undermining of tolerance—this deliberate and systematic attempt to create a climate of fear, of misunderstanding and, yes, of contempt and hatred of people who happen follow a different religion—right here in this city, because apart from anything else, that is presented as the attitude of the typical westerner, the typical United Kingdom citizen and the typical Christian and used as an excuse by the extremists in Syria and Iraq.

To persecute a minority, the first thing that the persecutor has to do is to create a fear of that minority. The Nazis could never have got the acquiescence of so many people for the persecution of the Jews had they not been able to make people scared of the Jews. There are journalists and others on these islands and in this very city who are embarking on a deliberate attempt to make us scared of the Muslims in order to make us hate the Muslims. At the same time as we speak out and act against the persecution of minorities in the middle east and elsewhere, we must recognise that that fuelling of hatred against religious minorities on our own islands has an impact on the way that conflicts and oppression can be addressed elsewhere.

I wish we did not have to have this debate. I would love to think that our successors two or three parliamentary generations from now will not have to have this debate. I am not convinced that we as a society—I include myself—are doing nearly enough to deal with the seeds of hatred, ignorance and intolerance in their early days
to prevent them from growing into the unbelievable barbarity that we have heard described. I pray that one day, when we say “never again”, it really will be never, ever again.

10.40 am

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on bringing these issues to our attention in his own, traditional way, the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who also has a wonderful track record in this House, and my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) on also bringing forward these issues.

I agree with the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) that the debate has been cross-party in nature. I am sure we all agree on the question of genocide; the question is how we go forward from here to the main Chamber. He was quite right to say that the true Islam in the Koran displays an extraordinary respect for human life, which is unfortunately not what we see under the practices of ISIL/Daesh.

Many Members mentioned the coup in Turkey. Just yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) and I spoke with members of the Alevi community here in London. We are hearing of a number of attacks by jihadists on Alevi communities in Turkey and huge concerns about the lack of order and insufficient policing. If the situation is not contained, I fear it could lead to further loss of life. That is why it is so important—the hon. Member for Congleton challenged us on this today—that we somehow bring the question of genocide back to the House. If we are seen to stand by, then later on other atrocities will somehow seem to be acceptable.

I want briefly to address some of the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South. He is quite right, so may I press the Minister on the question of training for the Home Office? There is a great deal of pressure on the asylum team—they have many different pressures on them—but will he please tell us whether, as highlighted in the APPG’s report, he is 100% confident that individual casework officers, who make crucial decisions on people’s lives, have the right training on freedom of religion and that they understand the different religious groups and the persecution? Will he underline his commitment in this debate to high quality decision making, and not just “That will do; let’s get through the pile of decisions”? As Members of Parliament, we know that people come to us in our advice surgeries desperate for a decision and desperate for their personal situation to be looked at. Will the Minister please give me his assurances that the training is up to date, that the decision making is on target and that he will pursue the issue of high quality training and retention of really good staff? We know that a lot of people have left the Home Office since 2010. I look forward to his response on that.

10.45 am

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, as I lose my virginity as Immigration Minister. I hope you will be gentle with me.

First, may I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for calling a debate on this important issue and for giving me the opportunity to respond? I pay tribute to him for his role in the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, and for all the hard work that went into producing the report to which he referred. I entirely agree that the Government should do all they can to help those fleeing persecution, whether they are targeted because of their religious beliefs or for other reasons, especially given the threat posed by Daesh in Syria. This has been a useful debate, in which I have been made aware of a number of issues, which I will ponder over the summer.

The UK has a long and proud history of providing protection to those who need it. For example, since the war in Syria began, we have granted protection to over 6,500 Syrians and over 900 Iraqis in the UK. Indeed, since 2013, over 400 Iraqis have been resettled under the Gateway and Mandate resettlement schemes. Iraqi nationals will also be eligible for resettlement under the vulnerable children at risk scheme that my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), announced earlier this year.

However, our priority must be to seek an end to the conflicts in the middle east through diplomatic efforts, and to bring peace and security to the region to allow people to remain in their homes or to return to their homes without fearing for their lives. We must also continue to exert diplomatic pressure on foreign Governments to protect minorities and uphold fundamental human rights, including freedom of religion and belief.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) asked specifically whether the Government will participate in the conference in the US later this month. We will consider that and I will ask my officials to raise that with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.
I welcome the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) to her place. She spoke about staff training. May I make it clear that we are committed to continuous improvement in decision quality? UK Visas and Immigration recently rolled out improved training on how to assess credibility in asylum claims, which covers the types of questions to ask during an interview.

**Peter Grant:** It strikes me that there may be lessons to learn from the police. If someone comes forward to any police force in the UK and says they have been raped, sexually abused or assaulted, the police use specially trained interviewers who can also act as counsellors to help the person tell their story with the minimum of distress. Will the Minister tell us how the training of asylum and immigration officers compares with that given to those specialist police and civilian staff?

**Mr Goodwill:** There may be some similarities in the skills needed, but specifically we need to train people working for UKVI in the type of work they are doing. No one in the UK, and not the interpreters they have brought in, has the cross-referencing training necessary for new caseworkers, which addresses all aspects of asylum decision making, including religious-based claims and religious conversion, but we also need to look at some types of interpreters who may be antagonistic to the religion of the person, where that person has converted, and ensure that if the interpreter is not appropriate, we find an appropriate person to provide that service.

The Government are committed to delivering a robust, comprehensive strategy to defeat Daesh in Syria and Iraq as a leading member of the global coalition of 66 countries and international organisations. We are attacking Daesh militarily, squeezing its finances, disrupting the flow of fighters to its cause, challenging its poisonous ideology and working to stabilise areas liberated from its control. Our strategy is working. Thousands of people have so far been freed from Daesh’s rule and have been able to return safely to their homes.

The UK is leading the international policy debate. We are pursuing a comprehensive approach, both responding to the immediate humanitarian crisis and using our aid programmes to bring stability, jobs and livelihoods, reducing the pressures that force people to migrate. In February we hosted the Syria conference, which not only raised more in a single day than any previous event, but established a new approach to providing long-term support to neighbouring countries and the displaced Syrians to whom they are hosts. Our commitment to the 0.7% aid target ensures that we have the resources to demonstrate our global leadership in responding to emergencies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton wondered whether the Government agree that evidence must be collected for prosecutions against those who persecute religious minorities, and we are clear that those responsible for the heinous crimes that are committed—whether or not those are formally declared to be genocide—must face justice and be held accountable for their crimes. The UK co-sponsored a UN Security Council resolution to refer all those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria, regardless of affiliation, to the International Criminal Court, and we will continue to press that.

**Fiona Bruce:** Will the Minister kindly undertake to discuss with the new Foreign Secretary the motion unanimously passed by the House of Commons on 14 April, asking the UK Government to honour Parliament’s request to refer Daesh’s actions to the UN Security Council as genocide?

**Mr Goodwill:** There are a number of issues that I should like to discuss with the new Foreign Secretary, and that is one of them.

We continue to deliver a huge humanitarian aid programme and have been at the forefront of the international response to the conflict in Syria. We have pledged more than £2.3 billion—our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis—which is delivering vital assistance to refugees in neighbouring countries, on the ground, right now. We are also providing £79.5 million in humanitarian support in Iraq. That is the best way to ensure that our efforts have the greatest impact on the majority of refugees who remain in the region; and we believe that our focus needs to be on providing support through humanitarian aid to countries that are facing particular pressures, while offering resettlement to vulnerable people for whom return and local integration is not viable. To that end, we operate several discretionary resettlement schemes in partnership with the UNHCR—Gateway, Mandate, the Syrian resettlement scheme under which we are resettling 20,000 Syrians, and the recently announced vulnerable children at risk scheme, which focuses on identifying and resettling vulnerable children and their families from the middle east and north Africa region. We have committed to resettling up to 3,000 individuals at risk under that scheme over the lifetime of this Parliament. It is open to all at-risk groups and nationalities, including religious minorities.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the Minister for the responses he has given about the Iraqi vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, but if that scheme were to be carried out in a way similar to the Syrian one it would enable some 300 Iraqis to qualify. Will the Minister consider that?

**Mr Goodwill:** We certainly keep all those matters under review. I note the comments that have been made about a line in the sand, and I dare say that things may not be written in stone; we need to keep all matters under review as the political and military situation develops in the region.

Our resettlement schemes provide refugees with a direct and safe route to the UK, enabling them to avoid risking hazardous journeys into and across Europe. UNHCR works in the region and has expertise in working with refugees and vulnerable minority groups and in identifying individuals for whom resettlement is the best and most durable solution. It also ensures that our resettlement efforts are co-ordinated with schemes offered by other countries, so that the biggest impact is achieved for the most people.

It is important, however, that those in need of protection first register with UNHCR or claim asylum with the national authorities in the first safe country that they reach. Encouraging individuals to seek asylum at an embassy or high commission is not the correct approach; nor is it a practical one. First, under the refugee convention, someone must first be outside their country of nationality.
before they can be considered for refugee status. That is a matter of international law. Secondly, the Government’s approach is to alleviate the need to flee countries in the middle east by working to find political solutions while, in parallel, providing aid to the affected regions. A concerted effort from states to address the large movement of refugees and migrants will be discussed during the UN and Obama conferences in September.

The cases of those who claim asylum in the UK are carefully considered on their individual merits by caseworkers who, as I mentioned, receive extensive training and are expected to follow published Home Office policy guidance. I am encouraged to hear it acknowledged that we already have appropriate guidance for caseworkers. That guidance makes it clear that appropriate and sensitive questions must be asked, based on an understanding of religious concepts and forms of persecution. In particular, where a claim is based on religious conversion, the interview must explore an individual’s personal experiences and journey to their new faith. I agree entirely that that needs to be reflected in practice and I can assure hon. Members that I and my officials take the findings in the all-party group’s report extremely seriously. I will continue to improve training provided to caseworkers to ensure that policy guidance is followed in practice. Indeed, I undertake to create an early opportunity to see the processes being carried out, and to learn more about the challenges that we face in that regard.

Kate Green: To pursue a little further the matter of people who have converted, for many people it is not an event but a process; yet even embarking on that process can put them at risk of persecution. How can assessments be carried out to take account of that?

Mr Goodwill: I am very clear about the fact that we understand that conversion is often a journey or process—not a damascene moment, when someone sees the light. The interview questions and conversations seek to find out about that. It is not, as I said, just simple questions such as, “Name the 12 apostles,” or “List the ten commandments.” That is not the process we undertake.

The process provides a summary of the human rights situation in the country and clear guidance on the types of claim likely to lead to a grant of asylum, to support effective decision making and to ensure that we provide protection to those who are in genuine need. For example, we have recently revised our country information on Pakistan in the light of the recent report and the work of top international refugee law professors, we want to help ensure that those who are persecuted for their religion are given the asylum assistance they need. May I kindly comment on the new training that has been discussed: several organisations working on UK religious persecution asylum cases say there is still room for improvement.

10.58 am

Jim Shannon: I am reminded of the scripture text Isaiah 41:10:

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

I thank the Minister sincerely for his response, which has been excellent and in which there were some good things, including his remarks about the resettlement scheme, in response to an intervention. Daesh does not discriminate, and neither should we. I assure the Minister of the support of all-party group members, of whom there are many in this House and the other place, and its staff. Along with the work of the UNHCR, and in the light of the recent report and the work of top international refugee law professors, we want to help ensure that those who are persecuted for their religion are given the asylum assistance they need. May I kindly comment on the new training that has been discussed: several organisations working on UK religious persecution asylum cases say there is still room for improvement.

I thank the Front-Bench spokespersons and all hon. Members who have taken the time to come and make a speech or intervene, for their excellent contributions, and I will close with another scripture text: John 14:31:

“Arise, let us go hence.”

Let us and the Minister work on behalf of our Christian brothers and sisters.

11 am

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Channel 4

11 am

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the future of Channel 4.

It is a pleasure to introduce this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer; I believe it is my first debate with you in the Chair. This is clearly an important issue. In the post-Brexit politics we are in, a number of issues are not being given the merit they deserve, and one of those is Channel 4, which, like many of our public services, is under attack by the current Government. I feel that we ought to have debates on our public assets and services, and today is an opportunity to have one.

I have initiated this debate on the future of one particular public service that I cherish—Channel 4. It is a public service that is the cornerstone of Britain's world-renowned broadcasting ecology, but one that the previous Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), was hellbent on privatising during his time in office. We need to test the Minister on whether he is going to continue along the path followed by the previous Culture Secretary in respect of Channel 4. Although we have since had the reshuffle, in which the right hon. Gentleman was removed from that position, no doubt due to his unpopular desire to wield the royal charter review against the BBC, we cannot be complacent about preventing his ambitions from being realised.

We have good cause. A recent freedom of information request, seen by the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, revealed that the new Culture Minister met the previous Culture Secretary in secret to discuss Channel 4 reform options last September. It is important to put that on the record because we need to know where we are going. This is not a fresh start; there have obviously been conversations in the past and I think Parliament are going. This is not a fresh start; there have obviously been conversations with the former Culture Minister; I look forward to his comments, particularly on his time in office. We need to test the Minister on the reasons I have outlined, it is important that we ought to be told what those conversations were about. This is not a fresh start; there have obviously been conversations in the past and I think Parliament are going. This is not a fresh start; there have obviously been conversations in the past and I think Parliament are going. This is not a fresh start; there have obviously been conversations in the past and I think Parliament are going. This is not a fresh start; there have obviously been conversations in the past and I think Parliament are going. This is not a fresh start; there have obviously been conversations in the past and I think Parliament are going.

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The model is unique within the UK's broadcasting ecology. Unlike other organisations, Channel 4 operates as a publisher-broadcaster, meaning that it does not produce its in-house programmes. Instead, it commissions all of its content from independent production companies from across the UK private sector and works with more independent producers than any other channel. As a result, Channel 4 supports a vast network of small and medium-sized enterprises. Since its creation in 1982, it has spent £12 billion on content and, as the hon. Gentleman made the point I am going to make about the financial benefits of Channel 4 and the fact that it is an aggregate benefit, operating as now in the public sector but with private funding, and it is an asset to the public.

As Channel 4 occupies a crucial space in the UK's broadcasting ecology, it also play a vital role in ensuring that the ecology is representative of our society. According to Trevor Phillips, a former chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Channel 4 has been at the forefront of promoting minorities within our national media. Its news has a higher proportion of young and black, Asian and minority ethnic viewers than any other public service broadcaster. It is the only public service broadcaster whose overall viewership is getting younger, and its transformative impact on social attitudes by presenting the viewpoints of BAME and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, as well as people with disabilities, has been remarkable.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): On that specific point, we should pay tribute to Channel 4's commitment to showing more than 700 hours of coverage of the Paralympic games. More than 75% of its presenters will have a disability and will have been trained and they are the best in their profession, which will encourage and entice other media outlets to join Channel 4 in creating more opportunities for disabled people.

Graham Jones: That is an intuitive and well-made point. I was going to come to it further in my speech, though not with such eloquence and detail as the hon. Gentleman. Besides the Paralympics, long-term programmes such as “Dispatches” have been highly successful, and Film4 productions have been critically acclaimed so it is of little surprise that Channel 4 has been unfailingly popular since its creation. What is more, as a publicly-owned but commercially-funded broadcaster, it continues to air such innovative content in a sustainable manner. Because Channel 4 is funded by advertising and is financially self-sufficient, taxpayers can watch high-quality programmes at no cost.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I, too, am a fan of Channel 4, for all of the reasons that the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) have already mentioned, and because Channel 4 supports something like 19,000 jobs and spends more—some £600 million—on content from independent producers than any other channel in the UK. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if it ain’t bust, don’t fix it?

Graham Jones: Mr Stringer, I assure you I did not distribute my speech in advance of the debate, but that is a further point I will go on to elucidate. The hon. Gentleman made the point I am going to make about the financial benefits of Channel 4 and the fact that it is an aggregate benefit, operating as now in the public sector but with private funding, and it is an asset to the public.

The model is unique within the UK's broadcasting ecology. Unlike other organisations, Channel 4 operates as a publisher-broadcaster, meaning that it does not produce its in-house programmes. Instead, it commissions all of its content from independent production companies from across the UK private sector and works with more independent producers than any other channel. As a result, Channel 4 supports a vast network of small and medium-sized enterprises. Since its creation in 1982, it has spent £12 billion on content and, as the hon. Gentleman said, it spent a record £600 million on content last year alone, of which £455 million was spent on British programming. While other public service broadcasters have cut their investment in UK content, Channel 4's model has enabled it to weather market forces and increase its investment, and it therefore makes a huge contribution to the wider economy. Indeed, its own analysis has found that it adds over £1 billion to the UK's gross added value and supports 19,000 jobs per year, as the hon. Gentleman said.

Justin Tomlinson: Just as Channel 4 occupies a crucial space in the UK's broadcasting ecology, it also play a vital role in ensuring that the ecology is representative of our society. According to Trevor Phillips, a former chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Channel 4 has been at the forefront of promoting minorities within our national media. Its news has a higher proportion of young and black, Asian and minority ethnic viewers than any other public service broadcaster. It is the only public service broadcaster whose overall viewership is getting younger, and its transformative impact on social attitudes by presenting the viewpoints of BAME and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, as well as people with disabilities, has been remarkable.
Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I absolutely endorse everything my hon. Friend has said. Does he agree that Channel 4 has a great record of standing up to the political establishment—a role that is an essential part of our democracy?

Graham Jones: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend about standing up for democracy and for minorities against those at the top. That is an issue that we are both going through at the moment, in that we must have that conversation and support those within a pluralistic environment who wish to express a minority view. Of course, I am referring not only to Westminster and to the broadcasting ecology but to my own party. We must support pluralism, and Channel 4 does that. As mentioned by the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), the Paralympic games this summer is a fantastic example of just what Channel 4 achieves; 66% of the on-screen talent and 15% of the production team will be people with disabilities. The coverage will be more accessible than ever for disabled viewers, and Channel 4 has even set aside £1 million to encourage advertisers to make their commercial airtime more inclusive of people with disabilities.

Channel 4’s success in representing people across the UK is no more evident than in its engagement with regional talent. Apart from the BBC, it is the only broadcaster with a specific commitment to invest in production outside England. Indeed, in the past five years Channel 4 has invested £720 million in content outside London. Last year alone saw Channel 4 spending £149 million on production in the nations and regions and broadcasting over 50% of its hours from those areas. It runs a dedicated nations and regions team in Glasgow and operates a growing sales team in Manchester, and it works with a range of production companies across the north of England and Scotland. Channel 4’s direct investment in those areas is equally impressive. From the Northern Writers’ Awards and its creation of regional hubs to its funding of the Leeds-based company True North, Channel 4 is at the forefront of promoting regional talent.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I wonder what impact people watching “Eurotrash” 20 years ago had on the referendum, but we will park that for one minute. He rightly referred to Channel 4’s work in the regions. What does he think of suggestions that the headquarters should move out of London?

Graham Jones: Any decisions specific to Channel 4 need to be thought through. I am not for immediately saying, “Oh yes, that’s a good idea,” but as an MP from the Manchester region, I would welcome investment in my region and taking the headquarters out of London, if that is done in a reasonable, organised and logical way, but I am not averse to that argument.

Channel 4’s promotion of regional investment is impressive, and its model has produced a history of fantastic northern TV. As programmes such as “This is England” or “Phoenix Nights” testify, it represents a rare example of the Government’s so-called northern powerhouse at work. The nub of the issue is that privatisation would threaten Channel 4’s contribution to the economy and its success, and would certainly represent a threat to its model of promoting all these things.

Selling off Channel 4 would naturally transform its operational model from not-for-profit to for-profit. Its content would suffer as a result, since Channel 4 would have to cut its expenditure on programming by £280 million per year if, like ITV, it was to return a 28% profit margin to its shareholders. Channel 4 has a turnover of £1 billion—a 28% reduction would mean a huge cut in its commitment to regional programming, talent, supporting not-for-profit programming and all the good stuff that it does. Since the broadcaster is essential for sustaining the independent production sector, that would result in a reduction of funding for small and medium-sized enterprises and reverse Channel 4’s success in job creation.

A Channel 4 dictated by the needs of profit would also undermine its promotion of diversity. Under the current model, Channel 4 balances socially valuable but loss-making programming such as the Paralympic games with its more commercially successful broadcasting. However, under privatisation, programmes would be not only squeezed financially but determined by the shareholder, rather than societal value, as representatives from Sky and ITV have recognised. Channel 4 is distinct and different. That privatisation would be both economically nonsensical and socially irresponsible is made even clearer if we consider the country’s recent vote to leave the European Union, since Brexit has increased economic uncertainty and revealed stark divisions between our regions and nations.

Given that the UK requires economic stability and regional representation now more than ever, will the Minister press on with the privatisation of Channel 4, effectively destroying the organisation as we know it—one that has repeatedly weathered economic storms and helped to bridge the gulf between the capital and our regions—or will he put to rest rumours of privatisation and end a period of uncertainty that is having such a negative effect on Channel 4’s commercial activity? If he is going down the privatisation route, I will be very interested to know how he is going to do that.

11.14 am

The Minister for Digital Policy (Matt Hancock): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) for his contribution and for bringing me to Westminster Hall on day two of my new job. As he mentioned, I have had discussions about this issue with the previous Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and we decided as a Government to ensure that we would look at all options on the following bases.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I cherish Channel 4. It was introduced by a Conservative Government and we are proud of what it has achieved over the past 34 years. I want to see Channel 4 continue to thrive and have a sustainable future. The question is, how do we best do that? I am focused on the challenge of ensuring that the public service broadcasting system, with Channel 4 at its heart, can continue to play a leading role in the UK’s cultural life for many years to come.
We are committed to public service broadcasting in the UK, which is a key driver of one of the most successful TV markets in the world. Ofcom reviews consistently show that public service broadcasting is valued by the public. Its 2016 review, which was published only last week—I am sure the hon. Gentleman has seen it—found that last year, 84% of the TV population aged over 4 watched some of the main five PSB channels in a typical week; 86% of viewers believed PSB news programmes were trustworthy; and 83% of viewers felt PSB channels helped them to understand the world.

Channel 4 is a fundamental part of the PSB system because of the range of programmes it broadcasts, its reflection of the UK’s cultural identity and its distinct and different offering. As the hon. Gentleman said, it performs a role in challenging the establishment. That is something I have had direct experience of, and I have always enjoyed the rigours of the challenge that Channel 4 provides. It stands up to authority through, for instance, “Dispatches”. I also endorse the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) on the coverage of the Paralympics in 2012, which was outstanding.

Channel 4’s commitment to diversity in all its forms—in terms of not only gender or ethnic background but also, for example, LGBT diversity—is a valuable and important part of its remit. Channel 4 has developed a unique character since it was established under the then Conservative Government 34 years ago. From “Countdown” to “Gogglebox”, “Father Ted” and “Unreported World”, Channel 4 is known for its innovation, originality and outspoken nature. It has also played a key role in the development of the independent production sector, which is now a huge sector that exports around the world and is worth more than £3 billion to the UK economy.

We need to think about this more broadly than just the channel. Through Film4, the Channel Four Television Corporation has played a role in some of the British film industry’s biggest successes—“Slumdog Millionaire”, “Four Lions” and “12 Years a Slave” come to mind, but there are many others. The importance of Channel 4 is recognised across the industry and across the House.

Tim Loughton: I congratulate the Minister on his new appointment. In his first week in the job, may I suggest that this is an opportunity to preserve the innovative legacy of Mrs Thatcher when she created Channel 4 in the 1980s, and to make a name for himself by creating certainty for what is, as he and other hon. Members have commended it for, the most successful, diverse, creative, youth-engaged and innovative British-backed broadcaster, by saying once and for all that Channel 4’s future in its current form is safe in his hands?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend tempts me, but the broadcasting market is changing rapidly. That is why the previous Secretary of State decided to look at all the options. It would be a bit previous of me, on day two in my job, not to consider where that work has reached in our goal of a sustainable future for Channel 4.

Graham Jones: I accept and respect that this is day two of the Minister’s current job, but he had previous conversations about Channel 4 with the former Culture Secretary in his previous ministerial post, so it is not necessarily day two. Is he ruling out or ruling in privatisation and a sell-off?

Matt Hancock: It is also day two for my Secretary of State. The issue needs to be considered realistically in the face of the facts. Channel 4 acknowledged the risks facing its business model in its 2015 submission to Ofcom’s PSB review when it said:

“Channel 4 believes the potential downside risks associated with…factors, such as a faster shift to on-demand viewing, the emergence of new disruptive entrants, faster fragmentation of audiences, production cost inflation outpacing funding, and structural changes to the licence fee of TV, outweigh the potential opportunities. Moreover, Channel 4 is arguably the PSB most likely to face the future first, given its focus on risk-taking and trying new things, and also its targeting of young audiences, who are the most avid users of new technologies and platforms.”

That must be true. Some 94% of its total revenue comes from TV advertising, and with so much of its revenue coming from advertising, an open question remains about how Channel 4 is affected by shocks to the economy, such as Brexit. It is our duty to make Channel 4 sustainable.

Kelvin Hopkins: I congratulate the Minister on his new appointment. Will he, at the very least, take back to his colleague in the Government and to the Secretary of State the strength of feeling that has been conveyed from both sides of Westminster Hall this morning?

Matt Hancock: Of course. I think we are about to hear a bit more.

Graham Jones: I want to follow up on this interesting exchange. I recognise the passage that the Minister read from Channel 4, but it would be disingenuous to suggest that its position going forward is that it wants to change its model. Channel 4 executives are happy with the current ecology and want it to remain. They respect and see the challenges going forward, but at the moment their preferred option, by a considerable margin, is as we are, not for change.

Matt Hancock: As a Conservative, I understand the arguments against change. They exist in almost any circumstance, but that does not mean we should not look to the future and at the risks and opportunities it provides, and the way things are organised so that they make the most of the opportunities and mitigate the risks. That is what we are doing. I hope the hon. Gentleman has heard in the tone of my response that it is our approach to do that in a way that supports public service broadcasting and some of the unique attributes that Channel 4 brings to that broadcasting.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I reiterate the point about the executives being happy both with being scrutinised and with wanting surety for the market. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) that we would like to hear that Channel 4 is safe in our hands. Its achievements include issues such as transgender, and it is making its future safe with “Come Dine with Me”, which I think is funding most of the opportunities for diversity that the company is
Mims Davies: Bringing forward. I absolutely applaud the Minister for continuing to look at all the options, but I hope he comes back to the option that we are already at.

Matt Hancock: It is important to get this right and to take the time to come to the right conclusion. After all, the main channel, Channel 4, where most public service broadcasting resides, has seen its audience fall from more than 10% to under 6% over the last decade. We must take such things into account.

There are some concerns about the remit. Key to driving the public service broadcasting aims of Channel 4 is the remit, which has evolved over time. There are concerns, for example, about Channel 4’s performance against the requirement to provide content for older children. Ofcom has repeatedly raised this concern and the Lords Select Committee on Communications recently concluded that Channel 4’s current programming in this area is unsatisfactory. We must go into the full details of how the remit is executed to make sure we have got that right.

Ofcom also found that spend on first-run UK-originated children’s programming has fallen by 45% since a decade ago. Older children’s programming is an important part of the remit as written.

Graham Jones: This is an interesting debate. On the Minister’s point about falling viewing figures in the last decade, there is now, of course, a plethora of choice and channels. It is natural that, for example, if in his West Suffolk constituency there are 10 candidates on the ballot paper, everyone receives fewer votes, but if there are two candidates, everyone gets more. It is a bit like television channels.

The Minister says that viewing figures have fallen, but that is because of the plethora of offers available. The key point is that Channel 4 is not making a loss. It is still breaking even on its viewing figures. That is a key issue that we need to and should remember. It is not losing viewing figures and money; it is losing viewing figures because of diversity across the platforms, but it is not losing money. It is still providing wonderful content, which is probably better than 10 years ago.

Matt Hancock: The viewing figures I set out were a proportion of the market. The hon. Gentleman is right about Channel 4’s current financial status, but it acknowledges the risks because such a high proportion of revenue comes from advertising, which is, as everyone knows, a highly cyclical part of business and there may be shocks to the economy, not least the impact of Brexit, which is as yet impossible fully to ascertain. I take his point, but the matter must be looked at in the round.

I hope I have demonstrated the Government’s commitment to Channel 4 following its rich and proud history, our acknowledgment of and support for its work in promoting a plural and diverse element of our national life, its holding authority to account with rigour and innovation, and my personal commitment to Channel 4 and seeing it thrive sustainably. We will certainly take on board the points that have been raised from both sides of the Chamber. We will consider them over the summer with a mind to ensuring that Channel 4 has a strong and sustainable future. I have no doubt we will have the opportunity to discuss these matters again.

I have been remiss in waiting until the last minute of this debate to welcome to the Front Bench the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), who has a long history of involvement in these issues. We will make sure all views are considered and that, as we consider how the remit should be set going forward and how to ensure that Channel 4 is strong and sustainable in future, all voices in the debate are heard.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
Contribution of Poles to UK Society

[GERAINT DAVIES in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution of Poles to UK society.

It is a great pleasure to introduce this debate. First, I acknowledge the tremendous work that the Polish ambassador, Mr Witold Sobków, has undertaken during the past four years in cementing bilateral relations between the United Kingdom and Poland. In my estimation, Mr Sobków has been one of the best diplomats to the Court of St James’s. Unfortunately, we are losing him shortly, because he is going back to Warsaw to work at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but this great Anglofile has worked tirelessly to promote relations between our two countries, and I take this opportunity to thank him for his contribution to Anglo-Polish relations.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): On behalf of the Opposition, may I associate ourselves with those comments about His Excellency Witold Sobków? We entirely endorse the very generous comments. He has been an excellent ambassador. He is a man who has been not just a great friend to this country, but a great representative of the Polish people in this country. On both sides of the Chamber, we are honoured and delighted to associate ourselves with the hon. Gentleman’s words.

[Interuption.]

Daniel Kawczynski: I think this is the first time that I have heard applause from the Public Gallery, but that just goes to show what a popular figure His Excellency is.

As the first ever Polish-born British Member of Parliament, I take great pride in my Polish roots, and I feel a sense of responsibility, given my Polish background, in sometimes putting to the fore, in the crucible of the House of Commons, issues pertaining to Anglo-Polish relations, but also the wellbeing of the huge Polish diaspora who currently live in the United Kingdom. I remember that 16 years ago, when I was first considering standing to be a Member of Parliament, I was told by a very senior person that I would never become an MP “with that completely unpronounceable Polish surname” and that I would have to change or anglicise it if I was ever to be elected as an MP in this country.

I refused to do so. I told that person in no uncertain terms that I would refuse to change my surname, because I am very proud of my Polish roots; and I have to say, having been elected now on three separate occasions by the people of Shrewsbury to represent them, I think that is testimony to the way English people, British people, treat outsiders who have come into this country and welcome and accept them. That is a wonderful thing. I think we are one of the most tolerant nations in the world. I went on business to more than 90 countries around the world before I became a Member of Parliament and I think the British people are among the most tolerant and welcoming of any in the world.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): From one colleague with a difficult-to-pronounce name to another, may I very much welcome what my hon. Friend is doing this afternoon? Just from a historical perspective, the contribution of Poles to this country goes back to the Spitfire pilots in the second world war. The Polish community club in Dunstable in my constituency is a very welcome and important part of the community. All of us completely and utterly reject the reprehensible attacks that we have seen from a small part of the community on some Poles in this country.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention; I concur with him.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): In the same vein, may I say that, as my hon. Friend may be aware, unfortunately a few weeks ago a vile racist action occurred in my constituency of Huntingdon and led to anti-Polish leaflets being distributed. I want to thank him for giving us the chance today to set the record straight and for giving me the chance to give the view of the overwhelming majority of my constituents, who were horrified by that unacceptable activity in our town, which has no history of such behaviour, and who welcome, applaud and value our Polish residents for their hard work and their significant economic and cultural contribution to our local community.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I will say a little about some of those issues later.

Some Polish journalists say to me, “How can you, as someone of Polish origin, have campaigned for Brexit? How could you have done that when, by extension, it will prevent more Poles from coming to the United Kingdom?” I can understand why some Polish media commentators complain about some of us campaigning for Brexit, but I am not going to be prescriptive here. It is not for me to tell all 850,000 Poles living in this country where their loyalties ought to lie, but for some of us who have come to this country and settled here and whose families have been born in this country, our loyalties have moved to the United Kingdom.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) rose—

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) rose—

Daniel Kawczynski: I will give way in a second. I think it is very important for those Poles to understand that when some Poles have moved to the United Kingdom, although we will always cherish Poland and our roots and links with that country, our new loyalties must lie with the United Kingdom.

Neil Gray: On that point, in my constituency of Airdrie and Shotts we have a thriving Polish and eastern European community. I have been concerned to receive some correspondence from Poles and other nationalities who are concerned about their residency future. Does the hon. Gentleman believe, as I do, that the Government could be doing more to reassure those residents and workers in this country, including in my constituency, of their ongoing future in this country?
Daniel Kawczynski: Yes, and I will refer to that specifically in the main body of my speech, so let me get on with it before I take any other interventions.

With regard to the Brexit vote in the referendum, I believe that the main reason was taking back control—my constituents in Shrewsbury wanted to take back control—but there is no doubt that immigration played a part in it. I have had many discussions with the Polish Government, the Law and Justice party, which is affiliated to the Conservative party in the European Parliament, and I have tried to make them understand that although the free movement of people is a very important concept and a fundamental right enshrined in the European Parliament—by the way, it is even more important for Poles, who were locked behind the iron curtain for 50 years—we have to have an immigration policy that is managed and sustainable. It is not in the interests of Poland or the United Kingdom for there to be completely unmanaged flows of people between these two countries.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab) rose—

Chris Stephens rose—

Daniel Kawczynski: I will give way in a minute; I just want to finish this point. I could take people now to Polish towns and cities that have been completely depopulated and where there are real risks, dangers and difficulties in being able to provide certain services as a result of the brain drain of young Poles away from Poland; and I could take people to communities in Britain where so many EU nationals have come that there is a real strain on local schools, public services and housing stock. I make this point because I think it is very important. If we are to convince the nations of both Poland and the United Kingdom that their rights will be enshrined going forward, we need to demonstrate that we can get a grip on immigration in the interests of both countries.

Mr Jim Cunningham: We should not lose sight of the fact that, certainly for the last 100 years, the Polish community or their descendants have made a major contribution in this country. There were Polish children in my class at school, and in the area that I represent and the Binley area in particular, there were Polish miners. More importantly, the Poles made great sacrifices during the war—at Monte Cassino, and in the RAF at the battle of Britain—so we should do everything in our power to stop any discrimination, not only against Poles but against other nationalities.

Daniel Kawczynski: Absolutely, I agree with that. The hon. Gentleman may disagree with me. He may believe that there ought to be free movement of people in perpetuity. I do not. I believe that immigration has to be managed and controlled for the interests of the state.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that Polish people who are already here, including in my constituency in Cheltenham, are making a superb and vital contribution to our society? Does he agree that we need to make it clear to them, as soon as possible and given their contribution, that they are welcome, valued and secure in our country?

Daniel Kawczynski: I absolutely, wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend and I will be coming to that point again in my speech.

Several hon. Members rose—

Daniel Kawczynski: I will take just two more interventions and then I must get on.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Polish communities in this country have integrated themselves into British society extremely well? Part of that is due to the excellent work ethic that Poles have shown. For example, in my own service, as it were, I have members of the Polish community, and I would find it very difficult to find a British person who had the same work ethic.

Daniel Kawczynski: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. May I dare to venture that if we wanted the ideal sort of immigrant, it could possibly be a Pole? Hard working, ethical—I will come on to all the attributes that my constituents talk about Polish workers here having, but yes, they make a huge contribution.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for securing this debate, but I am finding it difficult to follow his argument. This is a debate about the contribution of Poles to the United Kingdom, and now he seems to be wanting to stop the free movement of Poles to the United Kingdom. Clearly, for myself and my colleagues from Ealing, my hon. Friends the Members for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) and for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), with the largest Polish communities in the country that simply does not make sense and is out of touch. Will the hon. Gentleman say whether he supports, while we are in the EU—not just up to 23 June, but while we are in the EU—and will accept the free movement of Polish citizens to this country?

Daniel Kawczynski: I will come to that point later in my speech, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that I am sure that when we do pull out of the European Union there will continue to be opportunities for highly skilled Polish workers, who will ultimately be able to apply for work permits to come and work in the United Kingdom if their skillsets match our skill shortages. I do not see a dichotomy in what I am saying.

Chris Stephens rose—

Daniel Kawczynski: Let me make progress. I am not going to take any interventions for a few minutes.

During the battle of Britain, the Polish 303 Squadron got the highest number of kills. Let us just reflect on that. The 303 Squadron shot down more enemy aircraft than any other squadron. Winston Churchill talked about how there was

“so much owed by so many to so few.”—[Official Report, 20 August 1940; Vol. 364, c. 1167.]

That is a phrase that certainly I have remembered and sent a very poignant message. Ten Polish fighter squadrons supported the British war effort and they flew alongside their British comrades not only throughout Europe, but in North Africa. In 1941–42, Polish bomber squadrons
formed an astonishing one-sixth of the manpower available to RAF Bomber Command. Again, I would like colleagues to contemplate that: one-sixth of the manpower for the whole of RAF Bomber Command came from Poland. That is something that Poles are very proud of having contributed. We will come on later to talk about what they are contributing to Britain now, but that was a historic contribution.

No other country sent as many airmen and soldiers to fight in the battle of Britain as Poland. That is something we should celebrate, and we should thank the Poles for that unique contribution. When we talk about the differences between what Britain will be like post-Brexit and what it is like now, that is a drop in the ocean compared to what our country would have been like if we had not defeated fascism in 1940. One can only try to envisage what sort of society we would be living in now—not just here, but in Poland and across the whole of Europe—if those brave airmen had not, in certain cases, sacrificed their lives in order to fight and defeat fascism.

Of course, many of them had left Poland, their country brutally occupied, taken over and suppressed, but they did not give up. They did not just sit back and take it; they left Poland, sometimes via very dangerous routes through Iran and the Soviet Union, and they came here to continue the fight. Some of them were described as “kamikaze”—a word that I have heard repeated on many occasions—because they had lost everything. They had lost their families, their homes and their country, so they came here to continue that struggle against fascism.

Nine hundred Polish servicemen lost their lives serving Bomber Command and by the end of world war two, 19,000 Poles were serving in the RAF. Poles are very proud that their country contributed so much to the British war effort. That is recognised because we have a Polish war memorial at Northolt. I have to say that the Cabinet Minister who has been with me to the Polish war memorial most often, and who has engaged with the Polish diaspora on more occasions than any other—from my interpretation—is the current Foreign Secretary, as Mayor of London, he understood the importance of the Polish diaspora to our capital city, and he has been with me on many occasions to engage with the Polish diaspora. I very much hope that his experience of engaging with the Polish diaspora in London will help him, in the important coming months and years, to cement bilateral relations with Poland, despite the fact that we are disentangling ourselves from the political union that is the European Union.

**Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con):** My hon. Friend may not know that in Southampton there are more than 13,000 Polish nationals. In fact, Southampton is the home of the Spitfire, which was flown by so many Polish aircrew. They contribute positively to our community and are very welcome. On the subject of the EU, which is my reason for intervening, I voted to leave the political union that is the European Union.

**Daniel Kawczynski:** Absolutely, I know that my hon. Friend has engaged with the Polish diaspora on a number of occasions and is a great champion of them in his constituency. I completely concur with his sentiments.

It was not just the battle of Britain; it was not just the pilots flying during the battle of Britain; it was the Enigma code. Many people think that the Enigma code was broken at Bletchley Park. The first crack of the Enigma code took place in Poland and when Poland was occupied, Polish cryptographers, mathematicians and experts came from Poland to Bletchley and continued their work assiduously there. That contribution by the Poles in Bletchley has been marked recently, because relatives of those who served at Bletchley have been invited to services there to commemorate the contribution of their relatives. There are plaques, and more information is now being disseminated to schoolchildren visiting Bletchley about the unique contribution made by Poles to the British war effort. Breaking the Enigma code must have saved hundreds of thousands, if not millions of lives. If we had not broken those codes, the war would have been protracted for potentially many more years. By breaking those codes we finally began to understand what the German strategic battle plans were and react to them. Again, the Poles played an extraordinary role.

One of the most moving things I have done in the 11 years I have been a Member of Parliament was to visit the war cemeteries in Libya. I spent an afternoon walking along the rows of British and Polish tombstones. Many young Polish and British men died together in the desert in Libya, far away from their countries but in solidarity together to defeat fascism. That will stay with me for the rest of my life.

**Stephen Pound:** I realise that if we are going to talk about Polish heroism, we will need a lot more than an hour and a half—we would need a week and a half, at the very least. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will come on to Monte Cassino and General Anders, but can I ask him to place on record his appreciation for the Polish navy, which very seldom gets appreciated? Let us not forget that it was Commodore Francki, commanding Blyskawica, who sank the Bismarck and that it was Polish naval forces who defended the city of Glasgow during the Clydebank blitz. The Polish navy made an enormous contribution, but they seldom get thanked and recognised. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would wish to do so on this occasion.

**Daniel Kawczynski:** I am very grateful for that intervention; I agree with the hon. Gentleman. In representing one of the Ealing seats, he knows a great deal about the Polish community. I know that he loves paczki very much—that is the Polish for doughnuts—and he and I have often shared doughnuts from Poland. He is very assiduous in understanding his Polish community and I pay tribute to him for the interest that he has taken in representing so many Poles in Ealing.

Today, we have over 2,500 Polish doctors and many Polish nurses working in the United Kingdom. I would like to share an example of something that happened to me in Shrewsbury. He is a fan of one care home organisation—it has care homes across the whole region—came to me and said, “I would like you to put me in touch with a Polish agency that can
help me to find care workers for all our care homes.” I said to him, “Why do you want Polish care assistants?” I rather suspected that it may have been a monetary issue. He said, “To be honest with you, we have done surveys among all our residents and they have asked specifically for Polish care workers, because they are so attentive, kind and understanding, and they want to engage with residents and treat them with dignity.”

Every country has its strength and weaknesses, but as somebody who was born in Poland, who lived there and who goes there many times throughout the year, I think the way in which Poles are educated from a very young age about the importance of looking after the elderly, and how they are schooled by their families and society about the importance of care for the elderly, is second to none. I talked about how Britain is tolerant to outsiders and how other countries can learn from us; I think other countries can learn an awful lot about how Polish people treat the elderly. It is ingrained in them from a very early age, so I was very proud when the care home owner said to me that his residents had specifically asked for Polish care workers.

Poles have a reputation for having a very strong work ethic, for honesty and integrity, and for being polite, professional, punctual and non-exorbitant. Think about it: whether someone is looking for a plumber, a doctor or a dentist, or any other professional, those are very good adjectives to describe the sort of service that one would hope to expect from a professional. My message to all the Poles, whether they are plumbers, bricklayers, fruit pickers, doctors, lawyers, technicians, engineers or chefs, is that they all contribute—each and every single one of them—to this country and I am very proud of the contribution that the 850,000 of them make to our country.

Chris Stephens: Of course, it is still to be determined whether Scotland will be leaving the EU or not. [Interruption.] Well, that is still to be determined. The Ethnic Minorities Law Centre in Glasgow has reported to me that since the EU referendum, a number of Polish citizens have been to it with concerns about what will happen when the UK leaves the EU. In Glasgow, the Polish community has made a fantastic contribution to our city. Does it concern the hon. Gentleman that many Polish people are going to the Ethnic Minorities Law Centre in Glasgow has reported to me that since the EU referendum, a number of Polish citizens have been to it with concerns about what will happen when the UK leaves the EU. In Glasgow, the Polish community has made a fantastic contribution to our city.

Daniel Kawczynski: Yes, it does, and I will finish off my speech by raising that issue.

Mr Davies, with your permission, I will read out a brief statement from a colleague of ours from the Tory Benches—the Minister of State, Department for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). He was not able to come today because of ministerial duties, but his statement, which he wanted me to read out, better exemplifies the contribution of the Polish diaspora than I could ever have done. He is very eloquent in what he has written, which is about Harlow, the constituency that he represents so well. He says:

“I have a fantastic Polish community in my constituency of Harlow. They have opened up some wonderful shops in an area where the high street was otherwise empty and closing down. Their butchers, delicatessens and health spas in the town centre have really helped to regenerate the area for the better. They also pay a local state school in the Town for the use of their facilities on a Saturday to run a brilliant Polish school. The children who speak perfect English, are taught Polish, and their parents, whose first language is Polish, are helped to improve their English. I went to visit this school a couple of weeks ago to hand out their end of year awards. It was an honour to meet such hard working teachers, students and parents who contribute so much to our society.

However, it saddened me when someone I met there asked whether they would be allowed back in to the UK if they went back to Poland to visit their family for a holiday in the Summer and to hear others tell me about racist incidents they have had to deal with. I did my best to reassure them that they are welcome here and that nothing would change if they left for a holiday.

We should be celebrating all of the hard work and positive contribution of migrant communities that greatly benefit our society. I believe it is the responsibility of those in public life, of politicians, journalists, and anyone with a voice, to stand up and speak out against racism and to promote and celebrate the massive benefits that Polish, and other migrants, give to our country.”

Finally, I will come on to the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and deal with Brexit and the renegotiation. According to the House of Commons Library, there are 3.03 million EU citizens in the United Kingdom, as we speak—so, a little over 3 million—and there are 1.7 million UK citizens in the European Union. By the way, this is where I disagree with the Scottish National party—I have heard both the SNP and the Mayor of London speak about this. Both the Mayor of London and the SNP are singing from the same hymn sheet in saying that we must give a blanket assurance to all these EU nationals before we know how our own citizens are going to be treated in the European Union. I disagree with the SNP line and the Mayor of London’s line. I believe that our priority, first and foremost, should be the 1.79 million British citizens living in the EU. It would be highly irresponsible for us to give any assurances until we know that our own citizens’ rights have been protected in remaining in the EU countries where they have selected to live.

However, one crumb of comfort that I can give to the hon. Gentleman is that of course I understand the uncertainty that many of these hard-working Poles are facing as a result of the changes that are taking place. I believe and very much hope that the Minister will take back to the highest levels of Government—this is my message and the nub of my argument to him—the message that the rights of EU nationals must be at the forefront of our renegotiation. When we start this renegotiation process, because we are talking about human beings, their rights and their ability to stay and work, I very much hope that this can be catapulted to the very front of the renegotiations that are going to take place.

Chris Stephens: Does the hon. Gentleman not believe that part of the reason why there is so much uncertainty over EU nationals is the tone and rhetoric adopted by many of the people who were at the front of the leave campaign during the referendum?

Daniel Kawczynski: Well, I disagree with that. I do not know what happened in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, but in my constituency of Shrewsbury, we
had a very professional debate. We focused on constitutional matters and the ability to take back control. Actually, in my constituency there was very little discussion about immigration. Admittedly, we do not have many migrants in Shrewsbury, but immigration was not the predominant issue that resonated at public meetings that I attended.

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman spoke earlier about a care home that specifically wanted Polish workers. It is a fact that a great number of Poles now work in the national health service, care homes and many other services. Does he agree that, in the uncertainty about what will happen during the course of Brexit, there is a real danger that those people will decide to go back to Poland or elsewhere in the European Union, leaving us with the problem of filling their posts? Whatever happens elsewhere, it is important to ensure that the people we now rely on are allowed to stay in the United Kingdom.

Daniel Kawczynski: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I just made the point to the Minister that when we start the renegotiation processes, it is vital that the interests of the 1.79 million Brits in the EU and the 3 million EU citizens here are at the top of the agenda.

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government must ensure that current EU citizens in the UK are made permanently welcome, regardless of what others do? We must be better than those who practise racism and bigotry, and we must lead on the issue.

Daniel Kawczynski: Yes, of course. Where I disagree with the Scottish National party and the Mayor of London is that they have called for an immediate determination of the rights of the EU nationals in our country without even securing the rights for our citizens in the EU. That is simply wrong. We are talking about human beings and I am sure that, in the renegotiation process, we want to end up with a mutually respectful and beneficial outcome for the residents and citizens of the EU and Britain.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has paid much reference to Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, there is a presumption—maybe a negative one—that there are still two tribes or two communities at odds with each other. In fact, a host of new communities are coming to constituencies such as mine to work and to make a life for themselves and their families. In south Belfast, there are many good, hardworking and decent Polish people who make an enormous contribution to our life and the economy, and we would be much worse off without them. There is also an active Polish consul, working for integration throughout the community.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is quite a bit to be learned from the Northern Ireland experience about the interaction and integration of foreign nationals, particularly of the Polish community? That experience could be transferred, and some of those lessons—successes and failures—might be useful in the broader UK context.

Daniel Kawczynski: I very much agree with that. I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman has taken the time to explain the situation in Northern Ireland, which I did not touch on as I focused predominantly on England, where my constituency is. I am heartened. The Minister has seen the number of hon. Members who have come to this debate to highlight the impact of the Polish diaspora in their constituencies.

The overall sentiment of MPs here today has been to acknowledge the contribution that the Polish diaspora makes to our country, and to highlight concerns, as my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly) so eloquently described, about the attacks on Poles that we have read about in the media. We want assurances from the Minister that everything will be done to stamp out and penalise those who seek to commit such offences and, at the earliest opportunity, we want the Government to reassure Polish nationals that if they were in the country before 23 June, their rights to remain will be protected.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Mr Kawczynski has spoken for 34 minutes. I was hoping to start the Front-Bench speeches at half-past 3. There are a number of speakers, so each speech should last for about five or six minutes. I ask Andy Slaughter to start us off.

3.4 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): That is very kind of you, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on securing this timely and important debate. He paid tribute to the Polish community and its contribution to this country in war and in peace over a considerable amount of time.

It is right that we remember the contribution of the Polish armed forces in the second world war: in the air in the battle of Britain, which is well known about; on land at Monte Cassino; and, indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North mentioned, at sea, including in the battle of the Atlantic and at many other important and pivotal points of the conflict. The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham also mentioned Enigma and Bletchley Park.

The contribution of Poles to the victory in the second world war cannot be overestimated. There is a history of Polish migration before the second world war, but when we look at the issues that now face the diaspora community, it is particularly important that there has been continuity since that time, especially in west London—including my constituency of Hammersmith—where perhaps the largest Polish community in the country is based. In tragic circumstances, fleeing not just Nazism but communism, the community came here, settled and has contributed in an extraordinary way since that time, so we have what are generally known as the old Poles as well as the new Poles in west London.

There are now not just shops and many famous restaurants, such as the Patio Restaurant in Shepherd’s Bush; there is the Polish Social and Cultural Association—
[Andy Slaughter]

POSK—and the St Andrew Bobola church in Hammersmith. There is a settled and established community that contributes in every way. We probably do not acknowledge that enough, but in a way it speaks for itself.

What has happened since the Brexit vote concerns me, which is why I intervened on the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham. I asked quite how he squared his strong support for Brexit—I think he was a remain original—and then became a Brexiteer—given that the overwhelming response from the Polish community in Hammersmith, whether they are now British citizens or are still Polish citizens, has been one of dismay and despair, partly because of the insecurity that the vote has created. I will come to that in a moment and address some questions to the Minister but before I do, I want to talk about the physical and emotional impact of, and the response to, Brexit.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate. A number of people have spoken to me, saying that they just do not feel welcome any more. It is difficult to get that across and to change attitudes. I have spoken to a vast range of people, many of whom are investing and creating jobs in the country, and if they do not feel that they have a future in the country, they will leave and go somewhere else, and we will lose those jobs.

Andy Slaughter: I do not want to be melodramatic or exaggerate matters because that does not help. The Polish community is modest and stoical in the way it conducts itself, and the last thing it wants is to have attention drawn to some of these matters. On the other hand, we have to speak out because we must reassure people and speak out against the abuse, outrage and violence that is happening. If people do not accept that that is happening, they should do what I did: Google for five minutes. I came up with about a dozen incidents, and, of course, the problem affects other EU and non-EU communities. Brexit has given destructive forces in our society licence to make racist and other attacks across the board, not just on EU nationals. On the whole, it is not intelligent people who are doing this.

I will give a few examples. A Polish shopkeeper was taken to hospital after he was abused in his shop in Leeds. In Huntingdon, as was mentioned earlier, there were cards that read, “Leave the EU, no more Polish vermin”. There have been verbal and physical assaults, with the Metropolitan police and police forces across the country reporting a substantial rise in incidents and racist attacks. A family in Plymouth were targeted when a fire was started in the shed next to their house. They managed to escape without injury but with substantial damage to the property. An eight-year-old child in Humberside told his classmates to go back to Poland. In Yeovil in Somerset, in the west country, a Polish man was asked whether he spoke English before being repeatedly punched and kicked. He required hospital treatment for potentially life-changing eye injuries and a fractured cheekbone.

Such incidents are happening every day in our country in a way that I would not have imagined. I am afraid it is a consequence of Brexit. It is not the behaviour of people who voted leave; it is a licence that dark forces in our society feel they have been given by the vote that took place. I feel particularly strongly about this because of what happened to the POSK centre in Hammersmith. It has been there for 50 years. I went to school opposite. I have been going there for 50 years. I used to perform on the stage there. I eat there, I drink there, I socialise there, as do many non-Poles across west London. As a hub for the Polish community, there is nowhere that is more integrated than that centre, and yet it was sprayed with racist graffiti, in a way that has never happened before, directly after the Brexit vote. So we have to act.

I want to praise my local authority in Hammersmith, which, provoked by the incident at POSK, brought together all communities—there are more than 100 communities and languages spoken across Hammersmith—in what we called a unity day. On that Sunday, more than 4,000 people came and marched through Shepherd’s Bush and Hammersmith and ended up at Ravenscourt park for a celebration of what makes us stronger. I am pleased to say that Wiktor Moszczyński, who many people know from the Federation of Poles and as a former west London councillor, spoke on behalf of the Polish community on that day. The event addressed the issues that I am speaking about and it meant that we felt we are much stronger and louder and have more powerful voices than those forces that would divide us. I thank everybody in the communities who took part in that event.

Time is short, so I will end now with two or three questions to the Minister. First, we must have an answer to the question of security for EU citizens in this country. I have a great deal of time for the new Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, and I respect his work on civil liberties, but the comments he made at the weekend, about how new EU migrants who come to Britain could be sent home to stop a pre-Brexit immigration surge, have added to the confusion. We need to know not only what will happen to Polish and other EU citizens who were in the UK prior to 23 June, but what happens to those coming here now, and certainly up to the time, which could be three or four years hence, when we exit the EU. I do not know whether the Minister is able to answer that today, but he should say as much as he can.

Secondly, the Minister should say what the Government are doing to reassure communities that feel under threat and unwelcome in a society where they may have been not just for years, but for decades. Thirdly, what specifically will be done about Poles who are studying here at universities and paying a reduced fee because they are EU citizens, but whose courses may take them beyond Brexit? Will they suddenly be asked to pay hugely higher fees? What will be done to reassure employers who employ Polish people, but who will be thinking, “Are they going to be sent back? Should I be investing in their training? Should I get rid of them sooner rather than later?” All those issues are for today, not for two or three years’ time.

I am extremely grateful for this debate. We are united in highlighting the contribution that Poles have made to this country, but we have created a problem not just for the Polish community, but for many other migrant communities here. Whatever our views on Brexit, it is
the job of the Government and all of us to solve that problem, and I would like to hear about that from the Minister today.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): We have three speakers with five minutes each.

3.14 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): This morning one of my constituents, a lady called Kamila Avellaneda, emailed me. She is of Polish origin and she asked me to please go to the debate on Poland in Westminster Hall. I thought, “Why not?” My wife is half Polish. Her maiden name is Podbielski and she is now called Claire Podbielski-Stewart to keep the name alive. So I have a half-Polish wife.

I was an intelligence officer when Poland was a member of the Warsaw pact, and we considered Poland to be the least reliable Warsaw pact member. We thought, “If we have to go to war with the Warsaw pact, the bloody Poles would come on our side.” Mr Davies, did you pronounce that correctly. The Kabaty woods is south of Warsaw on 25 July in the Kabaty woods? I hope I pronounced that correctly. The Kabaty woods is where the Polish bombe—an ice-cream, but actually a machine—was handed over to the French and the British and was ultimately responsible for helping us to crack the Enigma code. The Poles did it. They started it. The French, the British, the Americans did not have it, but the Poles did it. They built up the fourth-largest army in Europe after the United States, the British and the Soviet Union. The Polish army recreated branches of the forces not only on our side of the divide, but in the Soviet group of forces. Polish forces were part of the Soviet forces heading towards Berlin via the Vistula and across Ukraine, and of course through Poland, and they stayed there until the Nazi menace was defeated. It is extremely interesting that 6,339 Poles are considered to be Righteous Among the Nations, because a large number of Poles tried very hard to defend the Jews in their country. Let us remember that Auschwitz was set up for the Jews, not for the Jews initially.

We had magnificent fighters pilots: 303 Squadron with its 126 German kills has been mentioned, and there were many more squadrons. The army was outstanding. The Polish army, working with the British army, was outstanding at Tobruk. It went into Narvik with my uncle, who was an army commander. Mind you, my uncle did have problems later. He may have got a Military Cross, but he also got two years in Strangeways for bigamy. [Laughter] I am afraid my family are pretty disreputable.

The Poles took the top of Monte Cassino. Has anyone looked at that mountain? Can you imagine what it was like to go up those broken sides with all that fire raining down on you? But the damn Poles did it, and they put the Polish flag on the top. God, they were great. The Poles dropped at Arnhem and we had Popski’s private army. I think he was Polish; I cannot remember, but I think he was part of the Special Forces.

I have 30 seconds left to say what I think of Poland. I think it is a damn good country. We are very lucky to have it as an ally. The Poles are really decent people. I visited it for the first time three months ago and—my God—I am going back there, and I am very grateful that we have such wonderful people as part of our NATO alliance.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I call Gavin Robinson for another five minutes of fun.

3.19 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart)—although I do not know how I am supposed to do it. It was a great contribution from a disreputable but great man.

Bob Stewart: It is my family who are disreputable.

Gavin Robinson: Guilty by association, Mr Davies, I think you will agree.

I want to thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski). I have been in Parliament a year now, and I have had the opportunity to meet and know the hon. Gentleman and to work with him in the all-party group on Poland. He obviously has a strong personal connection to the country, but he has worked tirelessly for the UK Polish community and for the social integration of those who believe in this country. Aside from the difficulties and the negative comments between Opposition Members and the hon. Gentleman about Brexit, no one can challenge his devotion and commitment to the country or the results of that commitment.

As Lord Mayor of Belfast, I was pleased to host events such as independence day for Polish citizens in the city. We have a wonderful honorary consul in Northern Ireland, Jerome Mullen, who does great work, particularly at difficult times. We have had numerous incidents of hate-filled attacks in my constituency and throughout Northern Ireland. The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atchams knows that that is part of my motivation for being involved in the all-party group and trying to build the bonds to bring an end such unnecessary hate in my city.
It was a huge privilege to welcome the ambassador to my constituency and to Titanic Belfast for the first ever Northern Ireland-Poland business conference, just over a month ago. It was encouraging to see how many businesses from across Northern Ireland have built up relationships and connections and are trading. They have the tenacity to ensure that when we leave the European Union, the connections, relationships and bonds will strengthen still, no matter what. We must be politically committed to achieving that.

In view of the negative press, if there is anything I can do in the next two and a half minutes, I think it is to challenge many of the myths that abound in Northern Ireland and, I am sure, in communities throughout the United Kingdom. There is a champion of Polish integration in Northern Ireland called Eva Grosman, who has committed herself to the Unite Against Hate campaign. She does remarkable work in Northern Ireland. She sent a tweet earlier in the week asking how many Northern Ireland MPs would attend the debate. I indicated that I hoped many would—and the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) has attended. We received quite a lot of abuse, along with misconception and downright lies. Such things—along with the facts—are laid out in a document I want to draw on, by Professor Peter Shirlow and Dr Richard Montague, called “Challenging Racism: Ending Hate” and published by the Unite Against Hate campaign.

The social attitudes survey replicated in the study said that 70% of people in Northern Ireland believe that EU migrants and migrants generally are a drain on services—that they steal our houses and jobs. That is nothing new. We will all have heard similar things quoted. However, in Northern Ireland, not even 2.5% of the population—43,000 people—hails from the EU. The figure for migrants is 4.3% of the population, but they have only 4% of the jobs, so they cannot be stealing the jobs. They are not stealing the jobs. As for social housing, we have 89,000 such homes in east Belfast, yet Polish migrants occupy 337. Does not that put into perspective the bile put about in our community? EU nationals contributed £8.8 billion a year more to the UK economy than they cost to services. In Northern Ireland from 2004 to 2008, there was a £1.2 billion addition to the local economy through ingenuity, hard work, the determination to strive, and the belief in British principles and the ideals of this country. Coming to Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom; believing in our people but, more importantly, believing in themselves—that is the contribution that Poland makes to this great country.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Poles are welcome in this country. Let that be the message that comes out from today. We appreciate and value that community in this country. Those bonds, forged in blood at a time of war, cannot be broken. For me, one of the great tragedies of the present situation is that the Polish community, which I have known all my life, is going through so many changes now. When I first met Poles, they were disguised. I am talking about the ’50s and the early ’60s: every Pavel was called Paul, every Malgorzata was called Margaret, every Marek was called Mark. They did not wear their Polish heart on their sleeve. We had the Polish churches, Polish national day and Polish celebrations, and even the Government in exile, but the Poles were quiet people. They got on below the radar, with the Polish Saturday school, gradually leading up to the Polish church, the Church of our Lady Mother of the Church. It was not until the Polish millennium in 1966 that the Polish community began to gain the confidence to stand proud and be Polish. I can still remember many of my Polish friends wearing England shirts in 1966. They told me it was not so much that they supported England—but we were playing Germany.

In 1995, an enlightened mayor of Ealing known as Stefan Funt, Polski burmistrz na Ealingu, actually placed the Polish eagle on the mayoral chain of the London borough of Ealing. One of Mr Ambassador’s predecessors, His Excellency Ryszard Stempowski, kindly authorised the placing of that crown, that 10 złoty piece, on the mayoral chain. For me, the sadness is that, whereas that community has grown in strength and confidence and has grown roots in the London borough of Ealing—which is twinned with Bielany Warszawa in the Masovian Voivodeship—all those links are now under threat.

My daughter teaches at Cardinal Wiseman high school in Greenford. A pupil went in to see her two weeks ago and said, “Miss, am I going to be exported?” That is a boy whose grandparents fought for this country. They came to this country in the fight against fascism in the hour of our need. Go to the Polish war memorial on the A40. Go, if you can bear it, to the Katyn memorial in Gunnersbury, commemorating the horrors of Katyn in 1940. Go to see all the physical evidence of the Polish community, who have made such a vast contribution, and then pause for a moment and say, “What are we doing? What can we do individually to say to our Polish friends, ‘We respect you, we want you—do not leave us. We will not desert you. We are not asking you to leave. We are holding you closer into our arms.’” Why? Because this is a community that has given so much. It is not a community that has asked or taken; it is a community that has given.

Sheltered housing has been mentioned. Maximilian Kolbe House was created by the Polish community for elderly Poles, not by going to the council or the Greater London Council or London County Council, or whatever it was in those days, but by creating something themselves. I could mention the Marian Fathers and Our Lady Mother of the Church, or POSK, which my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) mentioned and which I remember as the King Street Baptist church back in the day—I never appeared on stage, but I used to play football against them. Look at Courtfield Gardens. Look at everything that the Polish community has given.

I will never forget meeting members of the Polish community when Robin Cook was Foreign Secretary and we arranged for compensation and reparations for the forced labourers. I spoke to elderly Polish ladies of incredible, unimpeachable dignity, wearing fur coats that still smelled of mothballs in many cases, showing me the passes that they had been issued with when they were taken from Lwów to Bavaria as forced labourers. This is a community that has suffered so much, but which has the strength, courage and confidence to rise above that suffering and stand proud, not just in Ealing.
but throughout the United Kingdom. I associate myself strongly with the remarks of the former Lord Mayor of Belfast, the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson).

Have we come to the stage now where those proud people, who gave and suffered so much, and who have paid the price of citizenship in blood and their effort, look to the future in fear and trepidation? I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for giving us the opportunity to place on record the fact that we respect the Poles and want them to stay. We need them in this country and wish to hold them in our arms. Poland, we respect you. Poland, we love you. Poland, we thank you for all that you have given. Your home is here. May it forever be so.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Maybe another time. I invite Mike Weir to speak on behalf of the Scottish National party for up to nine minutes.

3.32 pm

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): I am pleased to appear under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on securing this important debate.

We have heard a lot about the second world war, but the connections between Scotland and Poland go back much further; indeed, Bonnie Prince Charlie was partly of Polish descent. We must also remember that, for example, two of the UK’s major stores were founded by Poles: Michael Marks of Marks and Spencer was a Polish Jewish refugee, and Jack Cohen of Tesco was also Polish, the son of a tailor who emigrated to London. Many of us will have seen the first episode of Joseph Conrad’s “The Secret Agent” on BBC this Sunday. Conrad was also a Polish immigrant to the UK, and was not fluent in English until his twenties.

In my part of eastern Scotland, there is a substantial community of Polish descent. Like many others here, I went to school with several children of Polish parents who had come to Scotland, fleeing the Nazi invasion of their homeland, to continue the fight as part of the UK’s armed forces. During that period, Scotland received a huge influx of Poles. Although we have heard much, rightly, about the contribution of Polish airmen to the war effort, they also made a huge contribution in the other branches of the armed services.

As the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) said, the Polish navy also came to Scotland. In September 1939, after the invasion of their homeland, four Polish destroyers sailed into the Forth port of Leith. Polish ships were stationed at Rosyth, Port Glasgow, Greenock and Dundee, and throughout the war they fought alongside the Royal Navy. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) paid tribute to the heroism of Polish naval personnel in fighting the Luftwaffe during the terrible blitz of Clydebank during his recent debate in memory of that terrible event. He said:

“So precise was the Luftwaffe’s delivery, in a spread-out formation, that of the thousands of bombers, only two would be shot from the sky in an valiant attempt by the crew of the Polish naval destroyer, ORP Piorun, in the dock of the greatest shipyard on the Clyde. John Brown’s.”—[Official Report, 15 March 2016, Vol. 607, c. 925.]

A plaque in Prestwick commemorates the Polish seamen who perished in the battle of the Atlantic. As has been noted, Polish troops took part in the ill-fated expedition to Norway in 1940, and in the battle for France. After the fall of that country, many came to the UK to continue the fight. Some were stationed in Scotland, as far afield as Cupar, Leven, Milnathort, Auchtermuchty, Crawford, Biggar, Duns, Kelso, Forres, Perth, Tayport, Lossiemouth, Arbroath, Forfar and Carnoustie. You will note, Mr Davies, that many of those places are in eastern Scotland, as the Polish division was given the specific task of protecting east central Scotland from a German invasion. That is why we find so many of Polish descent in my part of the country.

In the Angus county town of Forfar, a plaque outside the courthouse commemorates the occasion in March 1941 when King George VI and Queen Elizabeth joined...
the Polish commander General Sikorski to take the salute from Polish troops. The 10th Armoured Brigade under General Maczek—I hope I am pronouncing it right—were stationed in the town at the time. Other units stationed in Angus included the 10th Cavalry Brigade, the 10th Mounted Rifle Brigade, the 24th Lancers, the 14th Lancers, the 6th Battery Field Artillery, the 10th Engineers, the 10th Signals and a field ambulance unit. Nearly every town and large village in Angus has a connection with the Polish forces.

Those forces played an important part in the protection of the UK and the eventual liberation of Europe from the Nazis. Indeed, General Maczek commanded the First Polish Armoured Division, which fought from Normandy to Germany. After the war, many did not return to Poland but remained in the UK—some because, in the way of these things, they had met and married locals and settled in our nations, others because they had been loyal to the Polish Government in exile and could not return safely to a Poland ruled by a Stalinist dictatorship. General Maczek had his citizenship stripped from him. He settled in Edinburgh and lived until he was 102.

The descendants of those brave soldiers are now second and third-generation Scots, and they are as Scottish as I am. They have made an important contribution to our nation that should be celebrated. In recent years, the number of Polish people settling in Scotland has risen again, due not to war, thankfully, but to economic reasons. According to the 2011 census, Scotland’s Polish community has grown by 52,000 since 2001, but to put that into perspective, that makes up around 1% of Scotland’s entire population.

Scotland has suffered from years of population decline, but the population is now growing, partly due to new immigrants. We see that as a positive thing. Many of those new Polish immigrants are the most economically active. They work hard, pay their taxes and contribute to our society. In Angus, many have worked in the farming and fish processing industries, but many have also worked as doctors, dentists and other professionals. Many of our rural areas have a problem attracting such professionals. They are very welcome to assist in maintaining our public services.

These new immigrants are becoming part of our local communities, forming ties like their wartime predecessors. Many times when out canvassing in my constituency, I have come across families where the adults’ English is not good, so they call for their children, who speak to me in a strong local accent and translate for their parents.

**Dr Huq:** The hon. Gentleman mentions his canvassing experiences. My first experience as a candidate was being lobbied by Witkot Moszczynski, who has been referred to, on this Government’s plans to abolish the Polish A-level. It is a welcome U-turn to add to their list of U-turns. Has he come across that too?

**Mike Weir:** I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. The point I was making is that those children are part of our future. Many were born here or have spent most of their lives here. We should welcome the contribution that their parents also make to our nation.
of whom are from the Polish community. They make a
difference to our lives every day. Our NHS benefits
greatly from them; more than 55,000 of the 1.2 million
staff employed by NHS England are EU nationals. A
report by University College London revealed that
European immigrants made a positive financial contribution
of £4.4 billion to the UK between 1995 and 2011. Many
EU migrants, Polish people among them, contribute far
more to the UK in taxes than they will ever receive in
benefits and services.

All the foreign nationals who come to live and work
in the UK are of important economic benefit to us all.
They provide the diversity and the culture that make
Britain great—be they Polish, European, Asian, African,
Australrian or whoever. I believe all foreign nationals
contribute greatly to our society, and long may that
continue.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for
Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones):
It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship,
Mr Davies. I thank my hon. Friend. The Member for
Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for securing
this important debate, and I thank hon. Members for
their many and varied contributions. This has been an
extremely good and constructive debate.

The Polish contribution to the United Kingdom is
absolutely woven into the fabric of our society. Even
when we check the weather on the BBC, we see Tomasz
Schafernaker, who, like my hon. Friend, was born in
Poland. When we go into our towns and on to our high
streets, we visit Tesco and Marks and Spencer—both
companies founded by Polish Jewish immigrants to
Britain. We should welcome the contribution that Poles
have made and continue to make to our country. This is
a long and proud relationship, born out of both adversity
and entrepreneurial desire.

We have Poland to thank for one of our most famous
medieval kings, King Canute the Great, who was the
son of a Polish princess and the nephew of Boleslaw I
of Poland. We have King Canute, ruler of Denmark,
Norway and England, to thank for bringing comparative
peace and prosperity to these isles at the time. By the
16th century, we imported most of our grain from
Poland, and Polish merchants and diplomats came regularly
to London. Poles were such an established part of
everyday life by that time that even Shakespeare thought
they were worth a mention in “Hamlet”. By 1608 Polish
craftsmen helped the first permanent English settlement
in the Americas—Jamestown—to thrive.

We can find evidence of the early Polish contribution
to British society right here in London. After the battle
of Vienna in 1683, a pub in London’s Soho was named
after the King of Poland, and soon afterwards the street
on which it stands was named Poland Street—it exists
to this very day. Britain has been a place of sanctuary
for Poles for centuries, including in the 19th century,
when many Poles fled the Russian empire in search of
political sanctuary. That cemented Britain’s place as
one of safety for Poles, as well as many other communities,
which continues today.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for
Shrewsbury and Atcham, thousands of Polish men and
women made a crucial contribution to the allied war
effort, which directly led to the formation of the Polish
British community as it exists today. In 1940, with the
fall of France, the exiled Polish President, Prime Minister
and Government all transferred to London, along with
the first wave of at least 20,000 soldiers and airmen. Poles
formed the fourth-largest allied armed force after the
Soviets, the Americans and the combined troops of the
British empire. In Poland’s time of despair, they did
not give up; they came to Britain in their thousands, to
help to fight for the future of our continent. Poles were
the largest group of non-British personnel in the RAF
during the battle of Britain, as a number of hon.
Members have said, and the fearless 303 Polish Squadron
was the highest-scoring RAF Hurricane squadron in
that battle.

Dr Huq: May I recommend to the Minister the book
“Wira of Warsaw: Memoirs of a Girl Soldier”, by my
constituent George Szlachetko, about his mother Danuta,
who was part of the underground resistance? She was a
teenage girl soldier in the war. I warmly recommend
that book, which I went to the launch of recently.

Mr Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for that
recommendation. With the summer coming up, that
may well be a good read. I will come in a moment to a
very important point about the very situation that she
mentions, but first I would like to continue on the theme
of the battle of Britain.

Bramcote Airbase, which was on the edge of my
constituency, Nuneaton, is where the RAF was responsible
for training all the bomber aircrews for Polish forces in
1940, with four Polish bomber squadrons formed there.
In fact, there was an air crash around that time; in the
cemetery at Nuneaton, there are Polish airmen buried
along with German and British airmen. We still
commemorate those losses every year, to make sure that
we remember the contribution that the Polish made at
that time.

Bob Stewart: The reason why the Royal Air Force had
so many Polish pilots was that they were extremely well
trained and had fought for us in the battle of France
before the battle of Britain. They were very well trained
and we were very grateful that they were with us.

Mr Jones: I defer to my hon. Friend’s superior knowledge.
He knows far more about such matters than I do. What
he said is borne out by the fact that the Polish squadron
was the highest scoring RAF Hurricane squadron in
the battle of Britain.

It was not just in the air that the Poles excelled in
the second world war. Girls and women today would do
well to look at the contribution of one of the Special
Operations Executive’s most daring operatives, Christine
Granville, otherwise known by her Polish name, Krystyna
Skarbek. She proved that being brave and fighting for
one’s beliefs is not just a male preserve. On the battlefields,
the Polish army, under British High Command, was
instrumental at the battle of Monte Cassino, which was
mentioned by colleagues, and at the battle of Arnhem,
among many others. Perhaps most importantly, as my
hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham
and several other colleagues highlighted, we have Polish
cryptographers to thank for cracking the early versions
of the Enigma machine. That laid the foundations for
subsequent British successes in deciphering German military signals, which proved a key factor in many allied successes during the war.

Poles were with us in our darkest hour, as they were with thousands of Polish Jews in theirs. More than 6,000 risked their lives to save Jews from the horrors of the holocaust. Poles constitute the largest national group within the “Righteous Among the Nations”, an honour bestowed on recipients by Yad Vashem, Israel’s official memorial to the victims of the holocaust. Considering the harsh punishment that threatened rescuers, it is an extremely impressive number.

To ensure that the murder of millions of Polish Jews is never forgotten, the Department for Communities and Local Government is working with From the Depths to preserve the memory of the holocaust and give a name to those who were murdered, particularly those, including many Poles, who were placed in unmarked graves. That will offer some level of closure to the remaining holocaust survivors—including in Polish communities in this country—who have never known their loved ones’ last resting place. There are an estimated 10,000 sites of mass murder in eastern Europe, with only around 30 commemorated in the past three years. The project we have undertaken will rectify that.

Along with many others in this House and throughout the country, I reacted in absolute horror to the spike in incidents of hate crime following the EU referendum. My colleagues Baroness Williams, the then communities Minister, and Lord Ahmad, the then Minister for Countering Extremism, saw at first hand the effects of such mindless acts when they visited the Polish Social and Cultural Association—POSK—which my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham mentioned earlier in the debate. They met the Polish ambassador, His Excellency Witold Sobotkiewicz, who I am really pleased to see in the Public Gallery.

I want to make it absolutely clear that we will not tolerate those few individuals who target people because they are different. Our police forces are on alert and have encouraged people who have experienced hate crime to report it to the police. We have zero tolerance for all forms of hate crimes, whichever community they are perpetrated against. Just as Polish men and women stood by us during the second world war, we will stand by those who have come more recently and who have contributed to our national life.

Our communities must be open, tolerant and welcoming. I am pleased to say that my Department is working with Near Neighbours to fund projects that promote integration and support social action—projects like the one in Birmingham run by the Polish Expats Association, which is holding a series of events to promote Polish music and culture, along with that of other communities. The project will also hold fundraising events to help the homeless community in Birmingham. I am pleased that, in his capacity as chair of the all-party group on Poland, my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham will meet my departmental colleague, Lord Bourne, to discuss how we can continue to counter hate crime and promote integration in communities throughout the country.

Today, there are thousands upon thousands of Polish citizens and people of Polish origin making a difference to the UK. My hon. Friend and others have highlighted their vital contribution. That is nowhere more true than in the NHS, where, according to the figures we have from the Department of Health, more than 6,700 Poles work.

Andrew Slaughter: I am glad that the Minister mentioned the NHS. He will no doubt have seen the article in today’s *Daily Telegraph* by the NHS chief executive, Simon Stevens, in which he wrote:

> “It should be completely uncontroversial to provide early reassurance to international NHS employees about their continued welcome in this country.”

Will the Minister address the concerns I raised about employees and students, and about the reassurance we are giving to Polish nationals in this country about whether they can stay?

Mr Jones: The Cabinet Office, the Home Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office issued an extremely important statement on 12 July. If the hon. Gentleman reads that statement carefully, he will see that it provides significant reassurance to members of the Polish community, and quite rightly so.

Poles are known for their entrepreneurial skills. In 2014, it was estimated that 22,000 companies had been set up by Polish-born entrepreneurs, with a further 65,000 registered as self-employed. Poles are employed throughout our society, including right here in this very House. Polish people have enriched our country, and while the UK remains in the EU, all its citizens continue to enjoy the rights and status they had prior to the referendum. The Government want to be able to guarantee the legal status of EU nationals who are living in the UK, and we are confident that we will be able to do so, but we must also win the same rights for British nationals living in European countries. It will be an early negotiating objective for the Government to achieve those things together. Some Members have expressed concerns that that might not be a high priority for the Government, but I hope I can reassure them that it will.

Mike Weir: I hear what the Minister is saying, but does he not accept that the continuing uncertainty might lead to people drifting away from the UK? That could have a serious impact on the NHS, public services and many businesses.

Mr Jones: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but I do not think that the type of rhetoric he and his party are using is helping the situation either.

Mike Weir: It is not rhetoric; I was asking a question!

Mr Jones: I have been clear in demonstrating that the Government absolutely want to ensure that we guarantee the status of the EU nationals living in the UK.

In conclusion, I am sure that all Members present, as well as the people in the Public Gallery, will wish to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham for bringing this important debate before the House. We have always welcomed law-abiding migrants to this country, and the contribution of the Polish community to this country should absolutely be celebrated.
3.59 pm

**Daniel Kawczynski:** I am grateful to the Minister for the way he has tried to answer some of the questions we have posed to him. I look forward to working with him over the coming months to ensure that the Polish diaspora is protected. I am very heartened by the number of colleagues who have attended the debate and highlighted what is happening with the Polish diaspora in their constituencies. I am proud of the support I have received today and look forward to seeing the issue with the diaspora settled as soon as possible.

*Question put and agreed to.*

**Resolved,**

That this House has considered the contribution of Poles to UK society.

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4 pm

**Christina Rees** (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That this House has considered squash and the Olympic games.

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and it is great to see the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), in her place. I know how passionate she is about sport and I promise not to mention how well Wales did in the football.

So there I was in the newly built Bridgend recreation centre in the summer of 1975, working as a part-time sports assistant in the summer holidays, earning money to get me through university. Sport has always meant so much to me. I was very shy when I was a child and was bullied, so my mother sent me to judo classes to strengthen me up. I got a black belt first dan when I was 13 and a fourth dan in 1974. I may come across as being rather feeble but I do have a dark side, so be very scared.

I went on to represent Wales schools in hockey, tennis and athletics. Sport gave me a focus and confidence, and it made me a team player, so working in sport is an absolute pleasure. And now it is difficult to stop me talking.

Anyway, I was teaching in the main hall of Bridgend recreation centre when I heard this “thud, thud” noise, so I went to investigate. I climbed some stairs to a balcony and saw two men in a room using strangely shaped tennis rackets to belt a little rubber ball into submission. It was love at first sight—with the game, not the men. I hired a racket, scrounged a ball and spent every spare minute between shifts on court, teaching myself to play squash.

The players at Bridgend recreation centre adopted me and I joined the squash club. I made the men’s team and was spotted by Squash Wales, which invited me to the trials for Wales ladies. That was in early December and I did not hear anything afterwards, so I assumed that I had not made the grade. Then, just before Christmas I was reading the sport section of the national newspaper, as you do, when I saw, “Chris Rees makes home international team after playing squash for only six months”, so I thought, “Ah, that’s a really nice story,” before realising that it was referring to me. The selectors had forgotten to tell me that I had been picked.

There began a long career. I represented Wales more than a hundred times, playing at No. 1 for the team in some matches, and I won some titles, including the Dutch Open. However, I lost the Welsh Closed Final eight years in a row, which takes a bit of doing. I seem to remember that one year I was two games up and 8-0 up with match ball, and I managed to lose 10-8 in the fifth game. That was a classic Rees performance.

Squash has given me so much: fun; fitness; friends; and a job. I retired as a player in the 1990s and in 2004 I called Squash Wales as I was looking for an old friend. The director of coaching and development, Mike Workman, said, “Chris Rees! Haven’t heard from you for over 10 years. Thought you were dead! We need more women
coaches. There’s a course tomorrow—I’ll put your name down.” So I said, “No, I’m a player. I can’t coach. I haven’t picked up a racket for 10 years.” Somehow I lost that argument with Mike and I lost many more when he subsequently became my boss.

I ended up on that course and many other coaching courses. I became a level 3 coach, a tutor, an assessor and a Welsh national coach. I also had the honour of being awarded Sport Wales Female Coach of the Year in 2008. I am the only racket sport coach to have received that award—so far. Playing for Wales, representing my country and pulling on that red shirt was one of the best experiences of my life, but finding a youngster and coaching them through from being a beginner to playing for Wales, and watching them develop skills and tactical maturity, is much better.

It is difficult to choose just one player to speak about today, but Josh Lee was only nine when I started coaching him. He was so small that he used two hands to hold the racket, on both the forehand and backhand sides, but he was so talented that he was beating children much bigger than himself by being clever. Nevertheless, being two-handed restricts a player’s range of shot and their ability to reach for the ball, and it is very wearing on the hips. I knew that if Josh wanted to make the Welsh squad, I had to turn him into a one-handed player, but that meant he would have to go back to square one and lose to players he had never lost to before. I explained to him what I was doing and he understood. So we used a cut-down racket. He felt stronger with his left hand, so we tied his right hand behind his back. Then we spent many hours recreating his swing and grooving his shots. He went on to become a fine player and represented Wales. I am so proud to have helped Josh and all the other children I have coached.

Many people are surprised to learn that squash is not an Olympic sport; they assume that it has been in the Olympics for many years. Sadly, that is not the case. Squash is gladiatorial, dynamic, physically demanding and mentally challenging; it is like chess on legs. It teaches players strategy, tactics and how to outmanoeuvre an opponent, so it is an ideal grounding for a political career.

Squash is the only racket sport where players share the same space and it is a sport for life. Children as young as four are taking up squash and there is a masters circuit for everyone from the over-35s to the over-75s, with competitions in many countries, as well as the world and European championships. Welsh men became the over-70 world champions; they were all skill, trickery and bandages, but there was not much movement.

Over the years, the rules of squash and the dimensions of courts have become standardised, although some would argue that the rules are open to interpretation and manipulation, which sounds a bit familiar. Just ask our Squash Wales world referee, Roy Gingell, who has refereed some of the toughest and most competitive matches on the world circuit. He used to have hair like mine when he started refereeing; now he has a “Wayne David haircut”.

Why is squash not in the Olympics? It is a complete mystery to me. The International Squash Rackets Federation was formed in 1967; it is now called the World Squash Federation and is recognised as the international federation for squash by the International Olympic Committee. We now have over 50,000 courts in more than 185 nations, from the Arctic circle to the bottom tips of South America and Australia. Squash is a genuinely global sport that is played by millions of people all over the world. There have been male and female world champions from every continent. Last year, 47 countries hosted professional senior tour events, featuring players from 74 nations.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Being another retired squash player myself, I have listened to my hon. Friend’s speech with great interest. Does she agree that squash is more in keeping with the Olympic spirit than synchronised swimming, and that when squash was introduced to the Commonwealth games in 2002, both singles and doubles matches were hugely successful and enjoyed by both the public and the participants?

Christina Rees: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and I completely agree with him. I have yet to see the advantages of synchronised swimming, however hard I have tried.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for securing this debate. We are really dragging out the old squash players today; I, too, have loved the game for many years. We have watched golfers pulling out of the Olympic games; I understand why they are doing so, but not their comments about the Olympics not being the pinnacle of their sport and in a sense not being valuable. If squash was in the Olympic games, the Olympics would be the main tournament in the squash calendar. Squash would take its place as an Olympic sport more readily than golf and many other sports have done.

Christina Rees: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It would have been the pinnacle of my career to win a medal at the Olympic games. I do not understand golf. It involves spending five hours on a golf course, hitting perhaps 100 bulls, while on a squash court it is 100 balls in five minutes. I am sorry, but I do not get it. That is my personal opinion.

There are more than 750 players from 69 countries competing on the men’s and women’s professional squash tours. The World Squash Federation—WSF—world junior circuit for boys and girls embraces world, regional and national junior open events. We have WSF world and European rankings for seniors, juniors and masters. Squash has full gender parity and has begun to offer equal prize money for major competitions. The sport is fully World Anti-Doping Agency—WADA—compliant.

SQUASHTV is a WSF bespoke production, with staff who travel to all major events, providing quality and consistent coverage. We have super-slow-mo replays, multiple camera angles, in-play stats, live web transmission and full-match video-on-demand uploads. Super HD was introduced in 2015, and Sky, Fox, Al-Jazeera and others have broadcast agreements. The world series finals were shown live in 47 countries in Europe by Eurosport.

State-of-the-art all-glass show courts have been introduced, with glass floors and side door options. Squash is very cool now; it is presented very differently on the professional tour from how it was when I used to
play. There is music, lighting and MCs. An old friend of mine, Robert Edwards, started the cool commentaries, and became known as “the voice of squash”. There is a great connection between players and spectators. Para-squash is well established; for example, deaf squash has its own world championships, and the German squash federation is making excellent progress with wheelchair squash in an effort to meet the requirements of the International Paralympic Committee.

Squash has been a Commonwealth games sport, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) mentioned, since 1998, a Pan American games sport since 1995 and an Asian games sport also since 1998. The WSF has been working with the International Olympic Committee—the IOC—since 1986 to get squash included in the Olympic games, but at that time the sports included were set in stone, so it has been an uphill task to get squash in.

How does it work? The decision on which sports are included in the games is made at the same time as the successful bidding city is announced. In 2005, London won the bid to host the 2012 games, and the sports for 2012 were announced, with squash coming top of the shortlisted sports to be included. To be included would have been the city's aim because at that time James Willstrop of England was ranked No. 1 in the world and Nick Matthew of England was ranked No. 2—gold and silver Olympic medals. Jenny Duncalf of England was ranked No. 2 in the world and Laura Massaro of England was ranked No. 3—silver and bronze medals. I must admit that our Welsh players were not quite as highly ranked.

It was not expected that any places would be available among the then 28-maximum sports to be included in the London Olympics but baseball and softball were taken out, so we thought that squash would be in. However, we then fell foul of a rule that new-entry sports should have a voting threshold of 75%, which none of the shortlisted sports had, so London ran with only 26 sports.

Then, in 2009, the two vacant spots for the 2016 games were filled by rugby sevens and golf. Some may say that that was commercially attractive after the 2008 crash. It was then decided that a sport would be removed from the 28 sports in the 2016 games to make room for a new sport in the 2020 games. Wrestling was removed, but then added back in to a shortlist of eight. The list was then reduced to three sports: wrestling, baseball and softball—not a new sport—and squash. But in 2013, wrestling—not a new sport—was voted back in, when squash was, in fact, the only new sport on the shortlist.

Baseball is a major sport in Japan, so Tokyo was very keen on baseball. The IOC gave the host country the right to nominate new sports. Originally these were squash and baseball because they were the two on the shortlist, but Tokyo was encouraged to open it up to any sport. The city selected a shortlist of eight from the 28 sports that had applied. In August 2015, each sport gave a presentation to the IOC, and in the September Tokyo selected five sports, not including squash. They were baseball and softball combined, karate, skateboarding, sports climbing and surfing. Surfing does not even have an international federation that is recognised by the IOC and, over the level of waves in the Japanese ocean, a wave-making machine like the Snowdonia model might have to be installed. We cannot get away from Wales, no matter how hard we try.

The host for 2024 will be decided in 2017. The front-runner appears to be Los Angeles, but we have no idea whether there will be any space for new sports. Squash would be inexpensive to introduce, with men’s and women’s singles draws of 32 each. The competitions would take place on two courts over six days with two spectator sessions each day, and only 20 refereeing officials would be needed. Existing squash court venues could be used or glass show courts could be set up. Each show court could accommodate 4,000 spectators, using steep seating to create a fantastic atmospheric arena. There is no need for a warm-up venue because players train on the courts on which they compete. Imagine what two show courts in Horse Guards Parade would have added to the London games.

I understand that the co-vice-chair of our new all-party parliamentary group on squash and racketball, the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), had some discussions with Mr Speaker to see whether a show court could be set up in Speakers Court, so that MPs, peers and staff could have the squash experience. But that might have caused a few by-elections. Will the Minister pledge her Department’s support to squash at both grass roots and elite level? Will she shed some light on what has gone wrong with the bids to include squash in the Olympics, and will she help us to campaign for squash to become an Olympic sport?

We had a World Squash Day in 2015, on Saturday 10 October. This year’s day has not been announced yet, but perhaps the Minister would be able to join us. We would be honoured if she would join our APPG on squash and racketball.
strength in depth, and three men and six women are currently in the top 20 rankings. Recent British world champions, including Nick Matthew and Laura Massaro, are great exponents and role models, and inclusion in the Olympics would be an excellent showcase to help grow the sport further. However, it is right that the decision to add any new sport to the Olympic programme is a matter for the International Olympic Committee—the IOC. It would not be appropriate for the British Government, or any national Government, to become involved in that process, or to lobby for any particular sport’s inclusion, especially given the varied sporting landscape that we enjoy in this country.

I am sure the hon. Lady will understand that lots of different sports lobby me to lobby other organisations. It is difficult to go along having a preference for one or another. It is right that we do not get involved and that it is an independent process, but that said, it is open to the relevant national governing body, along with the appropriate world governing body, to make a case for the inclusion of its sport. I understand that that may be under consideration for the 2024 Olympic games.

Nothing is guaranteed, and the incentive to be included on the Olympic programme is one that many sports may wish to aspire to. We are now just over two weeks away from the Rio games, which I am sure will be a wonderful spectacle for athletes and fans alike. In the debate last week, I said that the whole country would be right behind Team GB and indeed ParalympicsGB in Rio. Preparations over the past four years have gone well, with UK Sport working hard, alongside the British Olympic Association and the British Paralympic Association, to confirm Britain’s position as one of the leading Olympic and Paralympic nations in the world. While competition in Rio will be strong, I know that our athletes are ready to give their all and make the country proud.

I can well understand why an exciting global sport like squash would wish to be included in this wonderful sporting panorama, reaching a global audience of billions and inspiring audiences at home. Squash has embraced innovation in recent years to make it a more televisable sport, and it is also in the lead on gender parity, along with other racket sports such as tennis. Indeed the success of the UK Sport-funded men’s world championship held in Manchester in 2013 has resulted in the event being awarded to the city. It will host the men’s and women’s world championships next year, which will also bring more media interest and audiences at home.

The success of the 2014 Commonwealth games in Glasgow further demonstrated the strength of the sport in the home nations and its enduring popularity across the Commonwealth. There is a possibility that the Commonwealth Games will be held again in the UK in 2026. That would be another chance to promote the sport domestically while showcasing the UK’s ability to host major events to a large international audience. It would also offer economic benefits to the nations.

Increased participation is vital to the lifeblood of any sport and helps to feed the elite level from a healthy grassroots base. That is why in December 2015 I published our new sport strategy, which puts increased participation at the heart of the long-term direction of sport. The cross-departmental strategy will use sport to improve and measure the physical and mental wellbeing of people, as well as offering individual, social and community benefits and economic development. Although UK Sport does not fund squash currently, it supports the sport domestically in bidding for major events such as the world championships and in the field of international relations.

Home nations sports councils such as Sport England and Sport Wales also invest money in the sport at the grassroots level, encouraging participation and fostering talent. England Squash was awarded £13.5 million by Sport England for the four-year period of 2013 to 2017—£8.5 million for participation and £5 million for talent. Sport England’s £5 million funds the talent pathway, supporting 4,000 young players aged 11 to 18, and the elite programme.

Great work is being done to encourage new players into the game and to address the recent decline in participation numbers. Squash 101 is a new programme to get more people playing—developed by England Squash and funded by Sport England—through group sessions. It delivers a fast-paced, intense workout without the need to play with a specific partner or within leagues. It includes formal and team challenges. Sessions are fun, informal and different every week. I suggest that that is how we do it in the all-party group to encourage more MPs to be active. They can come along and play a fun and innovative game of squash.

England Squash has also engaged with Sport England’s successful “This Girl Can” campaign to deliver “Squash Girls Can”. It is a fun beginners’ session for women and girls. The sessions run for six to eight weeks, regardless of age or experience, and are a great introduction to squash. Sport England continues to discuss potential ways to develop facilities with local providers, such as those in my constituency, where they are exploring ways to develop facilities, including a temporary show court, which is extremely exciting. From the perspective of the hon. Member for Neath, I know that Sport Wales has also done its bit to encourage participation, coaching and elite performance in the Principality. It has two top players in the men’s and women’s game.

There is certainly a case to be made that such an innovative and exciting sport should be able to grace the world’s biggest stage, and the chance to win medals for Britain would of course be a popular outcome from the Sports Minister’s perspective. However, the right and proper procedures must be followed to secure that global stage for squash, as with any other non-Olympic sport. Squash certainly has a strong case to make to the IOC, should it so choose. More widely, I assure the hon. Lady that the sport is healthy in this country. With the new sport strategy now in place, I expect that health to continue to improve and to deliver not only world-class performance internationally, but more opportunities across the country to enjoy playing this wonderful game.

4.25 pm

Question put and agreed to.
I beg to move, That this House has considered implications of the UK leaving the EU for the UK-Ireland border.

It is a privilege to be able to move the motion for debate under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. The debate covers one of the many acute aspects of the decision by Britain to leave the European Union. It is one of the most acute for me.

The recent referendum result to leave the EU sent shockwaves right across the world, economically and politically. In my opinion, and in that of so many people, it was a bad decision taken for all the wrong reasons. In Ireland, we define a referendum as a process that gets the wrong answer to a question that was not asked in the first place. That seems to be a very appropriate definition of what has happened here.

I congratulate the Minister on his appointment and thank him for his generosity to me on many occasions in the past. I thank him for being here today and welcome him to his new post. I and others in my party will be seeking a meeting with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to discuss all the issues involved in the aftermath of the referendum, but the future of the Irish border is a specific issue for which the Home Office has a particular responsibility. It is critical that the Home Office is fully engaged with the Northern Ireland Office, the parties in Northern Ireland and the Irish Government, on all the questions around the future status of the border.

The political, legal and economic complexities of a British exit from Europe are sobering, to say the least. The challenges that lie ahead will not be easy to surmount for Britain or Ireland, but they are particularly difficult for Northern Ireland. The effects of the vote for Britain to leave the EU are already being felt, with markets suffering and the sense of uncertainty turning off would-be foreign direct investors. The pound has lost almost a sixth of its value against the dollar. I have no intention of perpetuating “Project Fear”. Instead, I am asking myself how the delusions of “project fantasy” managed to persuade so many voters that leaving the EU would be truly in their best interests.

It is unfortunate that many of the key protagonists in the leave campaign have now jumped ship and abdicated themselves from taking any responsibility whatever for the damage that I believe they have caused—but I am not surprised. When the size of the task at hand dawned on them and the result became clear, they seemed totally overwhelmed. They had no plan A, let alone a plan B. What has become patently clear is that the leave side did not believe for one moment that they would succeed. Secondly, they did not have any coherent plan for steering us through the very choppy seas of the UK in post-leave mode.

I do not claim to have all the answers to the uncertainty—I am struggling to find some as I go—but the uncertainty that we now face is worrying. I am determined to do all that I can to ensure that the economic and social damage to Northern Ireland, as a result of the intended withdrawal from the EU, is minimised. After all, the majority of people living in Northern Ireland believe that the UK is better off in the EU—56% of them voted to remain.

During the EU referendum campaign, my colleagues and I in the Social Democratic and Labour party worked tirelessly to ensure that we had a high remain vote right across Northern Ireland. I have a particular sense of pride that my constituency had an excellent turnout, with more than 70% of those people voting to remain.

Personally, I have always thought that the EU is not perfect and requires much reform, but the reality is that if we were to dismantle the EU in the morning, we would have to find a new way of reinventing it the next day. People take all the benefits of the EU for granted and will only become fully aware of them when we have left. I urge our new Secretary of State to be cognisant of that fact, and fight, and fight again for the interests of people in Northern Ireland, to ensure that our unique circumstances are considered throughout the forthcoming negotiations. I believe that Northern Ireland’s interests cannot receive the full protection they deserve unless Northern Ireland has at least one, and preferably two, seats at the negotiating table as we go forward.

Prior to the referendum, at Prime Minister’s questions, I asked the former Prime Minister what assurances he could give us about the Irish border. I asked because many of my constituents were writing to me. They and I were deeply worried that there could be a return to a hard border and passport checks between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, which would be damaging to both parts of Ireland, economically and socially. In his response, the right hon. Gentleman warned of the checks along the Northern Ireland border with the Republic and of the possibility of people travelling from Belfast to other parts of the UK having to provide documentation in the event of an exit. The referendum result has created a major uncertainty about border controls and what they might look like. I welcome recent remarks by our new Secretary of State, who has said that there should be no border controls between the UK and the Republic of Ireland. On immigration and customs controls, there will be some changes.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): If we were not depressed before we came into this debate, we certainly will be now, listening to the hon. Gentleman. I congratulate him on obtaining the debate. Does he not accept that we are now not going to have the tanks and the guns and the barbed wire at the border? There is a new opportunity now for the United Kingdom as a whole to move forward and create a better country for the future of our young people, and to control our own destiny.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman for giving us an example of “project fantasy” and the delusions associated with it. Those are the very delusions that we have put up with for a number of months, on the fairyland that was going to be created post-exit. The only thing he missed out on was telling us the tooth fairy is going to come round, and that Santa Claus is going to come round next week and give us all a bag of money.

I am not depressed or being depressed—I am looking quite simply at the facts. It may be a giggle for the Democratic Unionist party, but it is not a giggle for a lot of people. On the Sunday two days after the result...
became obvious, I got 200 emails screaming at me—200 emails on a Sunday. I might normally get one email on a Sunday, if I am lucky, but I got 200, which were screaming at me and demanding to know what I was going to do about the mess that had been created. That is coming from the people I am elected to represent. Perhaps they have got it wrong—but I see no evidence of that. I see an awful lot of make-believe.

We have two or three simple options. If we do not have a hard border in customs and immigration terms, we have to have checks and controls at Larne, at the airports, and possibly even at Dublin, Dún Laoghaire and other places. An alternative option might be that the barriers are created somewhere about Dover and similar points of entry.

The issues, however, are serious, and make-believe and delusions will not help solve them. We will require a serious discussion with countries that remain in the European Union to ensure that we go forward with a positive agenda. That agenda will not be helped by delusions or aggression; it will require honest engagement and honest dealing with the facts.

**Tom Elliott** (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate, because it is an interesting one, especially for those of us who live in Northern Ireland, as well as in the Republic of Ireland. I understand some of the concerns, but will he also acknowledge that since the exit referendum some people living in the Republic of Ireland have said that because “Things have settled down quite well and quickly in the United Kingdom,” perhaps it is time for those in the Republic of Ireland to reassess their position in the European Union? Some are saying, “Maybe we should have a referendum on our membership of the European Union as well.”

**Dr McDonnell:** I remind the hon. Gentleman that 56% of the people in Northern Ireland want to remain in the EU, and I guess that a significant number of those in southern Ireland would also want to remain. The referendum, frankly, was a mistake; it has opened a can of worms, which will be difficult to sort out, and Britain will be much worse off at least economically, if not socially as well.

Remarks about what might, could or should happen are not a clear, definitive statement on, or a commitment to, what will happen. That clarity and assurance is why I asked for the debate today—we need clarity and the public want clarity. People are still in a degree of confusion. The vote has happened and stands, but an awful lot of the detail is missing.

Never before have Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland had a situation in which one is in the EU and the other outside it. Also, references to the common travel area simply do not cut any ice with me. We are in uncharted seas—circumstances we have never been in before—and the prospect of people undergoing passport checks as they move between the north and the south, or between Northern Ireland and Britain, is extremely concerning. It would be unwise to create obstacles to the free and seamless travel that now exists between north and south, and between Ireland and Britain, and which is critical for cross-border workers, students, traders and all the social networks that exist at all levels between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

Queen’s University Belfast is in my constituency, and students from Northern Ireland move to the south, to Dublin and other places, such as Galway and Cork, for university education—vice versa, students from the south travel to Belfast, Coleraine and Derry. The practicalities of how changes to the border will impact on them as individuals, and more widely on our economy, have not been fully assessed, and they need to be assessed and fully considered.

The EU referendum result cannot be allowed to erode the massive progress in benefits over the past 20 years, especially the good work of the peace process and the benefits that have flowed from the Good Friday agreement—or the Belfast agreement, as some might wish to call it—including the political process that has evolved; and that still has some way to go. Many of my colleagues have a living memory of a hard border across Ireland. It is not a good memory by any means. On the crucial issue of the border, however, I stress to the Minister that we need a post-Brexit situation for Britain and Europe to resemble the pre-Brexit situation as closely as possible. We want to minimise the damage and disadvantages that can arise.

Free movement of people has transformed the island of Ireland, and it is a central tenet of the Good Friday agreement. That agreement is rooted in European legislation and set in a broad European framework. A UK exit from the EU risks severely compromising the 1998 settlement. There is potential for erosion of its terms and benefits for all if and when Britain leaves the EU. The prospect of an exit has also brought us huge legal and financial uncertainty. Further uncertainty around what the border will look like in 10 years’ time leaves us vulnerable to those who would seek to take advantage of that uncertainty and our weakened state, including dissidents and other paramilitaries—that is not a threat, but an observation.

No one present wants to see a return to the darker days that we came through, but we must be aware of the delicate balance in Northern Ireland, the unique political settlement we have there and how it became destabilised after the referendum. Dragging a region that voted solidly to remain in the EU out of the EU—against its wishes—flies in the face of the principle of consent, which is at the very heart of the 1998 settlement. The new Home Secretary, the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Irish Minister for Justice, Frances Fitzgerald, must work closely on the issue to ensure that all concerns to do with the border are resolved in a functional and effective way that secures safety, and with it the freedom of all our citizens, north and south, in Ireland.

On customs and the border, leaving the customs union would necessitate customs checks on the border and, therefore, significant restrictions on, barriers to or limitations on travel at the border. We need to look seriously at an option for Northern Ireland to have a special customs status, whereby it is treated as being in the customs union for goods and services travelling solely within the island of Ireland. There are many precedents, but the one that comes to mind is Büsingen, a small German town on the Swiss border, which is treated as part of Switzerland for customs purposes. All
sorts of options are available, with other places having various arrangements, but that is one example. It is essential, for our small businesses trading across the Irish border, that we remain within the customs union, and for our exporters, that we remain in the single market.

Throughout Northern Ireland, 56% of our electorate voted to remain. The democratic will of the people in Northern Ireland cannot and should not be airbrushed out of the debate. Northern Ireland can, and might well have to, make common cause with Scotland and Gibraltar. I am looking carefully, along with others in Northern Ireland, at establishing an effort to discuss how we steer our way through the problems that exist already and that will present themselves—for Northern Ireland especially—in the future.

I sincerely hope that the EU will look at some kind of special access arrangement for Northern Ireland, given its unique constitutional status and its geographical location. All sorts of special EU arrangements are in place for the Isle of Man, the Channel Islands and a series of French dependencies throughout the world. The needs of our people and the future of our children depend on our getting the post-Brexit situation right, and doing everything we can to reduce the adverse consequences of Britain leaving the European Union. Our peace, security and economic prospects are in the balance. My plea to those present in Westminster Hall is to get this right—let us do everything necessary to ensure that the post-Brexit situation is minimally removed from the pre-Brexit situation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate is due to finish at 5.30 pm. I shall call the first of the Front Benchers to speak at 5.7 pm. The Scottish National party has five minutes, Her Majesty’s Opposition five minutes and the Minister 10 minutes, and then Dr Alasdair McDonnell has three minutes at the end to sum up the debate and his leadership on this important issue more widely.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The hon. Lady from the Social Democratic and Labour party had withdrawn voluntarily, so that is four Members to speak. We will go for a time limit of four minutes. Sammy Wilson will be the first to show us how it is done.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP) indicated dissent.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The hon. Lady from the Social Democratic and Labour party had withdrawn voluntarily, so that is four Members to speak. We will go for a time limit of four minutes. Sammy Wilson will be the first to show us how it is done.

4.50 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): You have probably chosen the wrong person to do that, Mr Hollobone, but thank you for calling me to speak. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

Despite the fact that we have blue skies outside and are probably experiencing a heatwave, the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) has brought clouds of doom and downpours of gloom to this room today. May I say just three things? First, he has made a big play of the fact that the majority of people in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU, but the important thing is that the majority of people in the United Kingdom, in a United Kingdom referendum, voted to leave the EU.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman said that we are already experiencing the shockwaves from that vote. Given that since the day the referendum result was announced, we have had an outpouring of efforts to talk the economy down by the bad losers in this debate, it is surprising that the economy and other things have not been far worse. Let us look at some of the rays of sunlight that are already coming through the gloom that he has brought in today. The biggest investment in financial services by a far eastern company—£24 billion—has been announced this week. Already, Australia, America, New Zealand and other countries are talking about new trade agreements. And rather than jumping ship as he said they were, some of the people who were at the forefront of the referendum debate are now in the lead. They are at the helm of the ship, and I have no doubt that it will be steered to a safe haven.

Thirdly, let me deal with the border, which was one of the scare stories used by those who tried to persuade people in Northern Ireland that leaving the EU was not in their interests. We have heard the same rhetoric today, but there is no substance to it. Here are the facts. The Irish Government have said they do not wish to have border controls. The British Government have said they do not wish to have border controls. The Northern Ireland Assembly has said it does not wish to have border controls. Historically, the common travel area has worked effectively and ensures that there is no need for border controls. The Irish Government chose not to be part of the Schengen arrangements. Why? Because they value the free movement of people between Northern Ireland, the rest of the UK and the Irish Republic.

Why would the Irish Government wish to open their doors and allow people freely to move into the Irish Republic, hoping that if they were economic immigrants, they might move on to the United Kingdom, or if they were coming in to do terrorist deeds, they would not do those deeds in the Irish Republic? It is in the interests of the Irish Government to do checks at ports of entry. Indeed, they already do them, and I believe that that is possible. When the previous Government—the spokesman for the Labour party, the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), may accept this—talked about e-borders, the first thing they did was to negotiate with the Irish Republic about how the e-borders arrangements for the United Kingdom could effectively be policed at points of entry into the Irish Republic, and the Irish Republic Government showed a willingness to do that and to work with those arrangements. We have had such checks historically, and I believe that we can negotiate to ensure that those stay in place.

4.54 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) on securing the debate and his leadership on this important issue more widely.

Contrary to what we have just heard from the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), several serious concerns and questions have arisen since the Brexit outcome, and those have been addressed by people
looking at these issues. He seems to blur and conflate the questions of a customs border, a migration border, the common travel area and the free movement of goods. Those things are distinct and should not be conflated. We had the common travel area in circumstances in which we still had customs borders and controls, and various exchange controls.

Committee B—the European affairs committee—of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, which met in Malahide in the aftermath of the referendum, commissioned a report on visa systems. It is a very good report, and I commend it to the Minister, who has just taken up his post. If he wants a good understanding of the true history of the common travel area—without the false assumptions and impressions that are given, as though the area has had a singular, linear and even history, which it has not—he would do well to read that report. I pay tribute to that committee’s two current rapporteurs, Aengus Ó Snodaigh TD, who represents Sinn Féin in the Dáil, and Baroness Harris from the other House. Her predecessor as rapporteur was Lord German. The report is a very thorough investigation of the issues.

In case other hon. Members care to know this, the committee is chaired by the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), who was not in the alarmist camp in relation to the leave prospectus. The report states that “as already noted, the Committee is not currently in a position to draw clear conclusions or make recommendation on the implications for the CTA of the UK leaving the EU. The Committee therefore hopes to explore this issue in more detail as part of any future inquiries it holds on the wider implications for British-Irish relations of the UK’s vote to leave the EU.”

Committee B will not be the only committee of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly to look at those issues, but it would be wrong of anybody to pretend that there are not issues or that my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South is trying to conjure up or exaggerate some of these problems.

Tom Elliott: I hear an acceptance, at least, from both the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) that the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union will be implemented. We are now talking about how that will be done and the mechanisms for doing that.

Mark Durkan: We are talking about the implications of the referendum result—a referendum, remember, that we were told at the time was constitutionally advisory. Let us be very clear that the people of Northern Ireland voted clearly to remain in the EU. They did so when they voted in the referendum, and they did so previously when they voted for the Good Friday agreement, which took the UK and Ireland’s common membership of the EU as a given. That is written into the fabric of the agreement between the two Governments; it is there in the preamble and it is there in strand 1, strand 2 and strand 3. That agreement itself depended on the principle of consent—the consent of the people of Northern Ireland, as well as the consent of the people of the south—and that consent was binding. It is a bit much for people to say that the rest of us should take it as a matter of passing lightness that Northern Ireland could be taken out of the EU against the clear wishes of its people and with potential damage to the Good Friday agreement.

Remember that, as well as the European Union being written into the Good Friday agreement, so too was the European convention on human rights, and we know that there are people in Government who want to dispose of that as well. Those are not mere stud walls to be knocked through but supporting walls of the institutions that we have and the Good Friday agreement, which was given democratic legitimacy—it is a democratic high-water mark—by the unique and overwhelming endorsement that it received from the people of Ireland, north and south, in 1998. No one has dared to contest that since. Those are not matters that we should in any way take as given.

Those who are now grinning like horses chewing thistles because they have got the leave result that they wanted cannot pretend that there are not issues and complications. The rest of us want to minimise and mitigate those, and ensure that people in Northern Ireland are in the best position. It is clear from what my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South said that that is what we are doing. We are looking for flexibility and a space that allows us to maintain access to the EU and its benefits, which a majority of people in Northern Ireland voted to retain.

4.59 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) on making the debate possible as this issue has been debated across these islands. I welcome the Minister to his new position. For the record, I declare an interest, in that I am an officer of the all-party group on the Irish in Britain. I speak in the debate not only as an MP representing a Scottish constituency with a large Irish diaspora but as someone with Irish grandparents—a common occurrence for those of us in the west of Scotland.

From a Scottish perspective, during the European Union referendum campaign, the messages those of us on the remain side from across the usual party political divide conveyed were of the many economic and social benefits of being a member of the European Union and how best our country and our people can interact with our neighbours across that Union. Critically, free moment of people and goods are, and continue to be, important benefits, and ones that affect many of my constituents. I have no doubt that that was one of the contributing factors that led to such a large vote to remain, not only in my constituency but across the nation of Scotland.

The status of EU nationals living in this country must be urgently addressed to reassure those living, working and paying their taxes that their future is secure. While the issues facing Scotland and the status of EU nationals can be appreciated in Northern Ireland, the fact that the Province shares a border with the European Union country opens up a new layer of complex issues.

Ms Ritchie: On that point, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the free movement of goods, services and people is vital to a sound economic base on the island of Ireland, both north and south, and also between Ireland and Britain?
Martin Docherty-Hughes: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady, as access to a stable economy creates stable communities. As I said, while the EU nationals issue can be appreciated in Northern Ireland, the fact that the Province shares a border with a European country opens up a new layer of complex issues, involving local businesses, communities and the people themselves that need to be addressed. The situation brings challenges for both the Irish and United Kingdom Governments as well as for the Northern Ireland Executive. A coherent strategy across all three must be in place to meet the issues that arise from the United Kingdom voting to leave the European Union. The impact of Brexit on the Good Friday agreement is still unclear. The United Kingdom Government must address the concerns that any possible hardening of the border will have a detrimental impact on the protections contained in the Good Friday agreement.

The second piece of legislation I will touch on is the common travel area. There are provisions outlined in that long-standing agreement that Irish citizens have a special place and status in UK law which is separate to and predates the rights they have as European Union citizens. I believe, as I hope the Minister does, that the common travel area is of the utmost importance in the positive working relationship between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Will the Minister reaffirm what the UK Government’s view is on the CTA and whether they intend to seek legal advice on how Brexit will impact on the legislation? In addition, will he advise whether the previous review of citizenship legislation in 2008 that called into question Irish citizen rights in the United Kingdom will re-emerge? Has consideration been given to amending or repealing the Ireland Act 1949?

It must be acknowledged that the majority of the people of Northern Ireland, like the sovereign nation of Scotland, voted to remain in the European Union, and that the United Kingdom Government must listen to those voices and take them seriously. Therefore, I would ask that the Government include the Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Executive every step of the way in this process, critically in relation to the border arrangements with the Irish Republic.

5.4 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) South for bringing this important issue for debate. Despite the somewhat negative view, we must look at Northern Ireland and where we are. There are two sides to this very honest debate between those who feel that Brexit will create problems and those who feel that it will create opportunities. I am one of those guys who thinks that we can get lots of opportunities out of this. That is the point of view from which I see it, and that is where I will come from.

As an example, tourism is one of Northern Ireland’s great success stories over the last period of time. The economy has grown on the back of tourism as well as many other things, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) said. Tourism revenue rose to £325 million, with some 2.1 million visitors in a year. Many of those visitors come from the Republic of Ireland up, and they come through customs in the Republic of Ireland. Whatever the system of agreed custom controls may be between Northern Ireland and the Republic, is there anything to say that they will not come through that? There is nothing whatsoever. If they have made the effort to come to Ireland and to come north, they will do the same again. I do not see any reasons why that should not continue.

We have had some high-profile events, including the £77 million Titanic Belfast and the Giant’s Causeway visitor centre, and the Gran Fondo Giro d’Italia took place in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson). There are cruise liners to Ulster shores that come regularly down to Strangford—to Mount Stewart, to Greyabbey and down the Ards peninsula—to explore. Lots of people come to take advantage of that and I cannot see that changing; why would that change?

Another area of cross-border connectivity is Northern Ireland’s electrical grid. Let us look at some of the connections we already have. There are three cross-border interconnectors with the Republic of Ireland. The main one, between Tandragee and Louth, has a capacity of 1,200 MW. We are also connected to the national grid of the island of Great Britain by the Moyle interconnector. Those are just two examples of connections between the two nations. We also have interconnector gas pipelines with the Republic’s gas supplier, Bord Gáis, which provides gas directly.

Those are things that are working and I do not see any reason why they would not happen, because all of those involved have good economic relations. That connection has been in place since 2005 when the gas company from down south made its first connection, with others in 2006 and 2007.

There are people who use the route across to access the Republic of Ireland for jobs and those who come shopping. Is there anything to indicate that those things will not continue? People will still come across the border to work and they will still come across to shop regularly.

Sometimes we need to look at some of the things that have happened. One of my constituents witnessed a people-smuggling operation coming back from Dublin to Belfast. He contacted the Garda Síochána and the guards arrested 50 people, who were taken away in Transit vans. There is an example of what can work because two countries want to see the system working. Criminal gangs and illegal migrants may attempt to use Northern Ireland as a route into the rest of the United Kingdom, but that is an issue that can and will be addressed.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim mentioned customs. Vehicle recognition makes it easier to travel between Belfast and Dublin and it is very possible that that can continue. The Secretary of State will try to get the best possible deal for Northern Ireland and I believe that we can have that.

Ms Ritchie: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Shannon: No. I welcome the fact that the devolved regions are to be given a voice in that process and I am confident that the Northern Ireland Executive will stand up for Northern Ireland in that to ensure that Northern Ireland outside of the EU will be an outstanding success.
Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I welcome the Minister to his new portfolio—I am sure it will not be a boring time for him. I thank the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) for bringing this very important debate to the House, because it is our friends and neighbours in Northern Ireland who may be facing the greatest uncertainty from the vote to leave the EU. The 56% vote across Northern Ireland to remain has been mentioned, and, with the prospect of a hardening border with Ireland, there will be many disappointed souls across the Irish sea. As the hon. Gentleman said, the referendum has certainly provided the wrong answer to a question that was not wanted in the first place.

I appreciate that some steps have already been taken to address issues around the common travel area.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) on securing the debate. Does she agree that there is an urgent need on the part of the Government to provide guarantees about the common travel area and the free movement of goods, services and people on the island of Ireland, which is central to our economy and pivotal to it?

Deidre Brock: I thank the hon. Lady for bringing up those points, which I will certainly address in my speech.

I appreciate that some steps have been taken to address those issues. The new Secretary of State, in a written answer last week, told me that senior civil servants from the UK and Ireland have already met to discuss it and to plan a way ahead. That is heartening news that is much to be welcomed, because, as I think everyone recognises, the damaging effects of a hard border on the economy of Northern Ireland would be substantial. However, as the hon. Lady, the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) and my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) highlighted in their excellent speeches, even if the CTA is protected, the free movement of goods around the island and across the border will remain an issue of contention and of extreme importance to the economies either side of that border.

I applaud the Irish Government’s moves to try to get some answers on the issue ahead of the Brexit negotiations—particularly the Taoiseach’s attempts to persuade the German Chancellor of the importance of the issue. I also appreciate that the Chancellor was not in a position to give any assurances and that she will hold her counsel until we are deep into negotiations. Will the Minister give us any indication that the Government are taking the issue seriously, and perhaps give some indication on whether there is likely to be any discussion with the Stormont Executive and with the Irish Government about the free movement of goods as well as the free movement of people? Has the Minister discussed with the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union the special circumstances in Northern Ireland where the legacy issues have been raised with the Brexit ministerial team, so that the issues are clear in their mind when they go into negotiations with the EU?

On the comments by Enda Kenny at the MacGill Summer School in Donegal about a possible border poll, is the Secretary of State talking to the Irish Government about that possibility? I understand he is opposed to such a poll and has been clear that he will not call it, but there are circumstances, delineated in the Good Friday agreement, that would force him to. Will the Minister tell us whether contingency planning is taking place for all of the possible outcomes of that nudge towards a poll? For example, does he support the convening of a council of all concerned, so that it can be discussed around a table rather than in newspaper headlines?

The Secretary of State is only a few days into the job and it will not be an easy place to occupy for the foreseeable future—I almost feel sorry for him—but we need to get running. The important consideration in all of this will be the people. How does this affect the people of Northern Ireland and how does it affect their ability to make an income? The people and the economy will have to be front and centre all the way through this and we need to hear clear and definite responses from the ministerial team on how they intend to take this forward, what immediate plans they have and where they think the arrows are pointing. As the hon. Member for Belfast South said, “the detail is missing”. As I said earlier, I welcome the Minister to the job and look forward to hearing his answers.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I call the Opposition’s longest-serving spokesman, Stephen Pound.

5.12 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I knew I would achieve something of note one day, Mr Hollobone; I had rather hoped for something of a little more significance, but I will take what I can get. Despite that, it is an absolute delight and a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I join the general chorus of approbation but I will take what I can get. Despite that, it is an absolute delight and a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I join the general chorus of approbation in congratulating the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) on bringing this crucial matter before the House.

This will not be the last such discussion we have. I see many years ahead of this sort of detailed discussion. There is absolutely no doubt whatever that we will be discussing this, probably to the exclusion of almost all other business in the House, certainly over the next two years. Equally, if anyone thinks for a moment that the history of Ireland somehow means that there will not be a border—be that a hard border, a soft border, a customs border, a tariff border, or the possibility of a physical border from Derry to Dundalk, as per Enda Kenny’s comments—that does not matter; there will be a border. This will be a division between two separate countries. There will be a border, and whether it can be defined in the boreens or whether there will be border posts or customs posts does not matter; it will be a border.

There is an idea that this country can go to Brussels or Strasbourg and negotiate, when in fact all we can do is to seek clarification. There cannot be a negotiation when one party has decided to leave a relationship. We will not negotiate or sit and divide up the CDs. It is not like a marriage breaking up, it is one country that has made the decision to leave a group of 28. That is the reality. The hon. Member for Belfast South rightly
raised the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland. I think the Minister—I have confidence in him—is going to have to accept that there is a unique circumstance here, and it is not just about the common travel area. I pressed the then Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister, on this subject two or three weeks ago and she was reassuring on the continuation of the CTA. It certainly requires major legislation for it to be amended, and I am hopeful about that.

When the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott) gets to his feet, a smile normally breaks across my face because I know that something good is going to emerge. As someone who enjoyed his hospitality, his good fellowship and his generosity of spirit in Maguiresbridge for the Twelfth celebrations, it is always a pleasure to see him, but today he set running another hare I had never heard of before. He is encouraging the Republic of Ireland to have its own referendum on moving away and to completely destroy this marvellous creation, this European Union, this great pride of civilisation that we have. He is encouraging our brothers, our sisters, our cousins, our neighbours, and in many cases our family members in the Republic of Ireland, to do what we have so foolishly done in this country—to turn our back on the security and safety of Europe. I rather hope that, when the word reaches Dublin that the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone has spoken, they will respectfully pay attention but decide not to go along with his advice on this occasion.

What can one say of the hon. Member for East Antrim ( Sammy Wilson)? A meteorological overview of this whole matter, seen through the weather forecast in Larne, is always something to be treasured, but in his search for sunlight in this particular case he was avoiding the reality. There are dark clouds over Northern Ireland relating to this matter; the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) raised the north-south aspect of that. The hon. Member for Strangford ( Jim Shannon) talked about the interconnector. That is yet another issue; there are so many that we need to discuss. I particularly look to the Minister for assurance on things like the European arrest warrant. Of the 50 EAW applications made between 2004 and 2012, 30 were made from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland. We need to know what the protocols for the European arrest warrant are.

I mentioned the joy of meeting the farming community in Maguiresbridge the other day. Do not forget that £1.2 billion of EU funding was to go to farming and agriculture in Northern Ireland between 2014 and 2020. I admire any group of people who care so much for the sanctity of their nation and for the proud privilege of wishing to stand on their own they would say no to £1.2 billion. My constituents would take a somewhat sanguine view of that, but I am encouraged by the self-sacrifice of the Fermanagh farmers.

There are many other issues that we need to discuss. Above all, we are faced with the reality that there will be some sort of border. We need to discuss that and go through it in detail, and we have started that process today. It will not finish for a long time, even after article 50 has been triggered. I am not saying I am looking forward to spending many hours in the company of the people in this Chamber, but I know I will and I know that it has to be done.

5.17 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am not sure if you spent the weekend waiting for the phone to ring from No. 10, but the Government’s loss is this Chamber’s gain.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) on securing a debate on this important matter and I thank him for his kind words. Like him, I was on the remain side, but as the Prime Minister said, “Brexit means Brexit”. I spoke with the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland only this week. As my predecessor in this job, he offered me a few words of advice—I offered him a few words of advice about the delights of the Ulster fry—and he made it absolutely clear to me that he is 100% committed to serving the people of Ulster.

The border is not just about the movement of people, it is also about the flow of goods, services and trade. It is about allowing the people of the United Kingdom and Ireland to live and work closely together. The arrangements with Ireland have their roots in the political, cultural, social and economic ties between the UK and Ireland, and the EU referendum result does not and should not change that. The UK has always been an open and outward-looking country and a great global trading nation, and that is what we intend to continue to be. It is important to understand that we are still members of the EU, and nothing has changed in the way our people can travel, in the way our goods can move or in the way our services can be sold, including across the border with Ireland and to the common travel area. I welcome trucks from the Republic of Ireland travelling on the roads of Northern Ireland, not least because they are paying the HGV levy, which helps to defray the cost of maintaining and modernising those particular roads. That was actually one of my ideas when I worked in the Department for Transport.

The common travel area arrangement predates the EU, and we remain committed to it. The Prime Minister spoke with the Taoiseach last Wednesday underlining that commitment. We have the full support of the Irish Government in working with us to preserve that arrangement during the negotiation of the UK’s exit from the EU, and work is already under way.

Since 1922, the position of Irish citizens in the UK and the citizens of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in Ireland has been unique. Nationals of each country are treated virtually identically to citizens, with an openness of travel between the two states. The absence of immigration controls has been commonplace since that date. We want to protect the principle of free, unhindered travel between Ireland and the United Kingdom—both north-south and east-west. Our relationship with Ireland is special and it should remain so. Air passenger numbers between Ireland and the UK are 10 million to 12 million a year, and passenger ferries between Ireland and Great Britain carry around 2.8 million passengers per year. However, the border is not just about the movement of people, it is also about the flow of goods, services and trade. We want to protect and enhance those benefits. Bilateral trade in both directions between Ireland and the UK is worth more than £60 billion a year. The UK is Ireland’s biggest trading partner.

The significance of the common travel area arrangement is perhaps felt most keenly at the land border between
Northern Ireland and Ireland—a border more than 270 miles long that meanders across the island of Ireland, cutting across some 180 roads and covering all types of terrain. On a relatively short journey, the border can be crossed several times. A considerable number of border crossings each day are undertaken by British and Irish citizens going about their daily lives. On average, there are nearly 17,000 daily vehicle crossings across the land border. In 2014, it is estimated that 13,200 long-term migrants arrived in Northern Ireland from Ireland and 10,500 moved in the opposite direction. The border today is invisible, with substantial cross-border movement and increasing business, cultural and economic links—all of which is good. A return to customs points, passport checks and a hard border would be a critical economic issue for Northern Ireland and is not wanted by any. All political parties in Northern Ireland and the Irish Government share a vision of peace and prosperity.

The common travel area arrangement was preserved when the UK and Ireland joined the European Union, and we will look to preserve it again, now that the UK is negotiating to leave. We will be looking to preserve the position recognised by the protocols to the European Union treaties—namely, that the UK and Ireland “may continue to make arrangements between themselves relating to the movement of persons between their territories”.

We share with Ireland an objective of preserving the common travel area and an open border on the island of Ireland, working together to avoid the imposition of hard border controls. For his part, the Taoiseach has been very clear that he wants to minimise any possible disruption to the flow of people, goods and services across the border. Indeed, I hope to have an early meeting with the Tánaiste to underline the importance of continued co-operation.

At a senior officials meeting in Dublin the week after the referendum, it was agreed that the UK and Ireland would work together on priority areas within the British-Irish relationship in the forthcoming negotiations on the future relationship between the UK and the EU. Three priority areas identified were: the common travel area and borders and customs issues; Northern Ireland and north-south issues; and bilateral security co-operation. The Government will ensure that the interests of all parts of the UK are protected and advanced as preparations are made for a new negotiation with the EU, protecting what the Prime Minister has called the “precious bond” between England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and between “every one of us”. Maintaining the long tradition of operational co-operation will be an important element of ongoing UK-Ireland collaboration to secure and strengthen the common travel area and to prevent the imposition of UK border controls.

Mark Durkan: I note what the Minister has said about developing and strengthening the common travel area. Of course, the common travel area does not apply in terms of visas for visitors coming in from outside Britain and Ireland, except for Chinese and Indian visitors. Will he, in his new role, look at ensuring that similar flexibility can be available to people such as the Chernobyl children who visit on a charity basis? They are not allowed to come in from Donegal to avail themselves of offers of swimming or bowling in a place like Derry because they need a separate UK visa. Similarly, visa systems mean that refugees from Syria who are on either side of the border, with some in Letterkenny and some in Derry, are not allowed to cross the border to meet one another.

Mr Goodwill: Those are all areas we can review. Indeed, they may well be a central part of the negotiations. The UK now has to raise its horizons to a global level. Travel and trade between the big trading blocs in the world are opportunities we must take. I commend the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) for the passion with which he spoke about the opportunities of Brexit and not just the Private Frazer doom and gloom we have heard from some others in the debate.

We must continue to protect our borders and the public from the threat posed to both the UK and Ireland from criminals and terrorists who may seek to enter the common travel area and do harm. There is a considerable amount of joint working and shared policy between common travel area members to secure the CTA external border—for example, investment in border processes; increased data sharing to inform immigration and border security decisions; interoperable passenger data systems; and harmonised visa policy and processes.

At the end of March, Ireland passed legislation that allows the UK to require carriers to provide advance passenger information on UK-Ireland journeys where collected by the carrier. A joint British-Irish visa scheme is an innovative scheme that shows just what can be achieved when the UK and Ireland work together in our shared interest. The scheme currently allows Indian and Chinese nationals who are issued visit visas for one country to also visit the other. That promotes tourism in both countries and is an important and expanding part of the Northern Ireland economy, which we are keen to see grow further.

Preparations for the negotiations to leave the EU must involve all the devolved Administrations, to ensure that the interests of all parts of the United Kingdom are properly taken into account. The UK Government are committed to working with the devolved Administrations as we prepare for a new negotiation with the EU.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Given the commitment to work with the devolved Administrations, will the British Government commit to support Irish citizens who have more or less equal rights to be in the United Kingdom? Will those rights remain? The Minister has skipped over that dramatically.

Mr Goodwill: There are a number of rights that existed before we joined the European Union. Those treaties are still in place, and there is no reason to suspect that there will be any threat to that particular situation.

The common travel area is a product of its unique historical, geographical and political context, evolving over time in a pragmatic way to meet the changing needs of society. That tradition of co-operation and the regard shown for the interests of all parts of the common travel area and the UK should continue now. Our objective for the common travel area as we enter negotiations with the EU on the UK’s departure is clear: to protect the arrangement for future generations...
of British and Irish citizens, cognisant of our shared identity and history. The Government will continue to work with Ireland and the Northern Ireland Executive in particular to see how best, collectively, we can work not only to maintain the common travel area but to enhance further the opportunities and strengthen our collective capability to protect our borders and the public from harm.

5.27 pm

Dr Alasdair McDonnell: Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for your great courtesy to all of us. May I also thank the Minister for his extensive reply? It is but the beginning.

Ms Ritchie: Does my hon. Friend agree that we are now in a unique situation in that Northern Ireland is being taken against our will out of the European Union while the other part of the island—Ireland—will remain part of it? That is the issue that presents difficulty for us.

Dr McDonnell: I agree with my colleague that there is potentially a pulling apart and a disconnect here; I certainly share that anxiety. We should all work and do all we can to ensure that this does not do too much damage.

My point is that if we fail to plan, we plan to fail. This situation has to be managed meticulously, in the finer detail. My sense over the last week was that in the light of the referendum, there were little or no plans in Whitehall. I mean no disrespect to anybody, because the vote to leave was not the expected result, but there was no negotiation strategy. There was not even a negotiating team.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr McDonnell: Sorry, I only have 30 seconds. There was no negotiating team and very few with the experience required. The same situation applied in Brussels, where there was no plan A, never mind a plan B. There are various attitudes among the 27 member states left towards Britain and the divorce. Negotiations can work if they are approached constructively and positively, but aggression and insults can be counterproductive. I thank my colleagues the hon. Members for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) and my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan)—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 20 July 2016

[Mr Nigel Evans in the Chair]

EU Referendum: Gibraltar

9.30 am

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): As an act of human kindness, I inform Members that they may remove their jackets and other articles of clothing, up to a point. I remind Members that if they make a speech, as opposed to an intervention, they are expected to remain until the debate is finished.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the EU referendum on Gibraltar.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I declare an interest: I am the chairman of the all-party group on Gibraltar. I have visited Gibraltar several times, funded by the Gibraltar Government, and I hope to visit again in September for Gibraltar’s national day. I also declare that I was the parliamentary lead for the Brexit campaign for a large part of the south-west of England, so, naturally, I was delighted by the result a month ago. Once again, we will be a free, sovereign and independent people, and that includes Gibraltar.

I welcome and congratulate the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), on his new position and I am sure that his father would have been very proud to see him occupying it. This is an historic occasion, as it is the first time that a Minister from the Department for Exiting the European Union, or the “Brexit Department”, has responded to a debate in this House.

Of the 23,000 members of the electorate in Gibraltar who were entitled to vote in the EU referendum, 96% voted to remain; there were 19,322 votes to remain as opposed to 883 votes to leave. Admittedly, that is slightly less than the 98% of the electorate who voted to remain British, but it is very impressive all the same. For perspective, however, that result in Gibraltar has to be seen in the context of the whole UK, where there were 17.4 million votes to leave, and as the Prime Minister has said, “Brexit means Brexit”.

Of course we recognise and understand the uneasiness, nervousness and fear that many people—including a large number of people in Gibraltar—are feeling at the moment. When the Chief Minister of Gibraltar spoke to the all-party group a couple of weeks ago, he described grown men being reduced to tears by the referendum result. However, I am told that the report in the Financial Times that Gibraltarians would like another referendum is too polite a word; the fact that Spain harasses Gibraltar and constantly seeks to undermine its status when, as he says, it has overseas enclaves of its own is tantamount to hypocrisy.

Gibraltar is the only British overseas territory that has a land border with mainland Europe. Given Spanish politicians’ continued use of Gibraltar to distract from their own failed policies and the dire economic situation in their own country, Gibraltar has a right to feel nervous about leaving the EU and Spain’s potential response.

Gibraltar is a fantastic economic success story. It has impressive economic growth, with GDP for 2014-15 having increased by more than 10.6% in real terms on the previous year, and I understand that the forecast for 2015-16 is for a further 7.5% increase. Gibraltar has a higher GDP per capita than the UK and Spain as a whole, and one that is greatly higher per head than in the neighbouring Spanish region of Andalucia. GDP per capita for Gibraltar is forecast to be £45,979 in 2015-16, which is a long way above that of Andalucia, whose GDP per capita was £12,700 in 2015, and even above that of Madrid, which was £23,400 in 2015. Therefore, it is unsurprising that up to 10,000 Spaniards a day cross the border to work in Gibraltar.

There is a feeling in Gibraltar, however, that leaving the EU will risk the current economic model and expose Gibraltar to new threats from Spain. Gibraltar faces a clear time imperative, as established businesses consider what to do next if they require access to the single market on an ongoing basis. The Gibraltarians’ large vote to stay in the EU is seen as a reflection of the fact that the EU provided a legal framework that drew red lines on how far Spain could go in imposing heavy-handed border controls and other sanctions before being called to order for breaching the law. However, international law and the UN also arbitrate on these issues, and as Spain’s NATO ally, we may actually have more strength in direct negotiations than we would otherwise.

Jack Lopresti: My hon. Friend for his intervention and I would put it more strongly than that. “Ironic” is too polite a word; the fact that Spain harasses Gibraltar and constantly seeks to undermine its status when, as he says, it has overseas enclaves of its own is tantamount to hypocrisy.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that he does on Anglo-Gibraltarian relations. Does he agree that the confrontational approach towards Gibraltar that Spain adopts is rather ironic, bearing in mind that Spain has numerous territories in Morocco? I thought that it had only Ceuta and Melilla, but upon closer inspection of the atlas, I see that Spain actually has more enclaves in Morocco.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this great and very appropriate debate. He referred to NATO. Spain is our NATO ally, and as a NATO ally, it is utterly disgraceful that it does
[Bob Stewart]

not allow our Royal Air Force aeroplanes to overfly its territory, while allowing Russian warships to rebunk at Ceuta. It is about time that our Foreign Office got a grip on this issue and explained very harshly to Spain that that approach is unacceptable, and I hope that message will also go out from this debate to the Spanish authorities.

Jack Lopresti: I thank my hon. Friend for his customarily robust intervention, and of course he is absolutely right. As he says, it is astonishing that a NATO ally should do that. It costs the British taxpayer several thousand pounds extra every time there is an RAF flight to Gibraltar, because the RAF does not have overfly rights with Spain, so its planes have to take a slightly longer route. It is also astonishing, given what is happening in the world with Russian aggression, that the Spanish are not only content to receive Russian warships but encourage them to refuel in their Moroccan territories. Those of us on the NATO Parliamentary Assembly are working towards getting that message—loud and clear—up the chain of command, because the current situation is appalling.

The people of Gibraltar should be reassured that my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr Cameron) said on his last day as Prime Minister that there would be no talks on sovereignty—joint or otherwise—against the wishes of the people of Gibraltar. I was extremely pleased that the new Foreign Secretary said last weekend:

“I was delighted to meet Chief Minister Picardo. I reassured him of both our steadfast commitment to Gibraltar, and our intention to fully involve Gibraltar in discussions on our future relationship with the EU.

The people of Gibraltar have repeatedly and overwhelmingly expressed their wish to remain under British sovereignty and we will respect their wishes.”

Important, he went on to say:

“We will never enter into arrangements under which the people of Gibraltar would pass under the sovereignty of another State against their wishes. Furthermore, the UK will not enter into any process of sovereignty negotiations with which Gibraltar is not content. We will continue to take whatever action is necessary to safeguard Gibraltar, its people and its economy”—and crucially he concluded:

“including maintaining a well-functioning Gibraltar-Spain border.”

Not only does Gibraltar wish to remain British—that is a right that we will always fight for—but it is a vital strategic military asset for the United Kingdom. It is one of our key forward operating bases in the Mediterranean and commands the straits. I look forward to the day when one of our new Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers visits Gibraltar.

There are two key issues for Gibraltar: the freedom to provide services, and a free-flowing frontier. Therefore, when the Minister sums up, I would like him to assure us that Gibraltar will not be a side-discussion that is left to the end of the negotiations on Brexit and therefore allowed to be bargained away, but that it is a red line that any bilateral treaty must include. Britain will need to be robust in the EU and the UN and in its lobbying of other countries to counter the consistent lobbying of them by Spain, as it presses its own sovereignty claim on Gibraltar. Importantly, the EU must not be allowed to take sides against the UK and Gibraltar on this issue in any way. We should increase our efforts in the UN to remove Gibraltar from its list of non-self-governing territories, as Gibraltar is clearly self-governing.

To reassure Gibraltar and its business community, I ask the Minister to act immediately and take one initial and hugely supportive step: establish a common single market between Gibraltar and the UK. It is within the British Government’s remit to do so. It is an entirely domestic matter that can be agreed by Her Majesty’s Government and the Government of Gibraltar bilaterally at any time without any EU involvement. It will give our Government some of the tools they need to stand ready to robustly defend Gibraltar if Spain exerts pressure, such as introducing heavy-handed frontier controls, during the future negotiations with the EU.

We must seek and promote the opportunities that Brexit presents to the people of Gibraltar. Gibraltar is building its own world trade centre, and unshackled from the EU, it will be able to maximise its ability to trade globally and to seek and secure bilateral deals with its nearest neighbours and worldwide. As part of the Great British family, Gibraltar and the UK will thrive and prosper out of the EU. The United Kingdom is the fifth largest economy in the world. We trade globally. We are the biggest defence spender in Europe—the fourth biggest in the world—with the world’s best armed forces. We are one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. We have one of the best diplomatic services across the world. We have a unique relationship with the United States and the Commonwealth.

Unshackled from the European Union, we will thrive and prosper as a nation even more. We will be free to make trade deals all over the world without the increasingly restrictive practices of the European Union. Gibraltar, as part of the Great British family, will also gain great advantages from being unshackled from the European Union and being free to trade with the world. The fact is that Gibraltar is British and will stay British as long as it wishes.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jack Lopresti: I was on my last sentence, but please go ahead.

Mr Dodds: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I apologise for interrupting his peroration. I congratulate him on securing the debate and on his re-election as chair of the all-party group. On what more we can do to reassure Gibraltar, one of the issues that came up at the last all-party group meeting was a desire not only to frame things in the negative, where we talk about having no discussions and no ceding of sovereignty unless the people of Gibraltar agree, but to adopt a more positive attitude, with the British Government saying, “We cherish Gibraltar. We value it, and we want it to remain British.” In all our discussions, we need to emphasise that we look positively on Gibraltar’s Britishness.

Jack Lopresti: Absolutely. A lot of us have been fighting almost a rearguard action, initially in the days following the referendum, against all the negativity. There seemed to be a grey cloud over people who were on the wrong side of the debate, so far as the referendum
went. We all know that optimism is a great driver of business and opportunity. We have a responsibility to re-emphasise and reinforce—I hope the Minister will do so—the fantastic period that can come after Gibraltar is free to trade with the whole world in its own right. Gibraltar is in the hearts of everyone here in Parliament.

9.43 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) on securing it and on setting the scene so well. We look forward to hearing the new Minister. I wish him well in his new position. We missed him in Belfast at the credit unions international conference, but his name was held in high esteem. He will know that anyway, and we look forward to his deliberations on this matter.

The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke has always been a friend of Gibraltar and I welcome his commitment to the Rock as we embark on our new relationship with the EU as a nation, including Gibraltar. Clearly, what he and the rest of us will do in our contributions is set the scene for Brexit and say how we can look forward positively to securing our future and that of Gibraltar outside the EU.

To give a bit of background on Gibraltar's relationship with the European Union—I am sure Members are aware of this—in 1972 the UK Act of Accession to the European Economic Community applied the EEC treaties to Gibraltar, with the crucial exception of the customs union, the common commercial policy, the common agricultural policy, the common fisheries policy, and the requirement to levy VAT. Gibraltar has been in the EU since 1973 as part of the UK's membership and applies EU law except in those four areas. If the exemption has worked, there is more that can work to the advantage of Gibraltar in how we move forward. The exemption from those areas means that potential difficulties in Gibraltar leaving the EU may be averted. The debate gives us all a chance to challenge the Minister, and I know he will clearly hit upon those things in his response. It is nice to have some people in the Gallery who have a particular interest in Gibraltar. Some are former Members of this House, and we are pleased to see them here today.

Importantly, Brexit will not alter Gibraltar’s constitutional status in relation to the UK—a relationship most of us are very proud of and very loyal to, as this debate will outline. Many will remember that the border between Spain and Gibraltar was closed between 1969 and 1985, before being reopened around the time that Spain joined the EEC. EU free movement rules have meant that the border has remained open ever since, despite the Spanish obstructions, of which we are all aware—they are well documented, and the hon. Gentleman referred to some of them in his introduction. When the UK leaves the EU, if we do not apply to stay in the European economic area, the free movement principle will no longer apply. That will need to be addressed as part of the Brexit negotiations.

I had a chat last night to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. He indicated some of the proposals that there would be on free movement and how his staff will work on that. Spain will be able to close the border and establish border and passport controls, and the Spanish Government indicated in May 2016 that it might do so if the UK voted to leave the EU. Spain has been obstructive, regardless of EU principles. The reality may well be that the operation of Gibraltar's frontier with Spain will be determined by the relations between the United Kingdom and Spain.

Within hours of the result, the Spanish Foreign Minister, José García-Margallo, crowed:

"The Spanish flag is now much closer to the Rock."

The Chief Minister of Gibraltar, Fabian Picardo, responded in his usual manner to all these sorts of threats over sovereignty by saying:

"Another day, another stupid remark."

The Foreign Office insists it will not even discuss the issue. Perhaps the Minister can give some indication of that in his response. I welcome the position the new Foreign Secretary has adopted so far.

Bob Stewart: I am extremely disappointed with the way that the Foreign Office pussyfeet around on this matter. It spends its time summoning the Spanish ambassador and giving him a wigging, and he goes off and nothing changes. It is about time our Foreign Office had some courage and did something, and represented the people of Gibraltar better.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. This debate will give us all a chance to show that commitment and that eagerness to have the Foreign Office respond more robustly to any deliberations that come from Spain.

We need to strike the right balance between defending Gibraltar and the United Kingdom's interests and developing an understanding relationship with Spain to succeed in securing Gibraltar's stability. The Chief Minister of Gibraltar, Fabian Picardo, has held talks with the Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, where the suggestion was made that they, along with my home nation of Northern Ireland, could maintain the UK's membership of the EU, while England and Wales leave the EU. Let us be clear: the referendum has spoken. The majority of the people of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have indicated that they wish to leave the EU. That decision has clearly been taken.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the assurances are excellent? We are glad to see the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and other Government Ministers offer those assurances to the people of Gibraltar, but Gibraltarians and other regions in the UK want and hopefully will see more than just assurances post-Brexit. They want action to ensure prosperity outside and beyond the EU, so that those regions and Gibraltar in particular will benefit from the post-EU position.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend and colleague for his comments. The debate clearly gives us all a chance to chart and look forward to how Gibraltar outside the EU can succeed even better than it has. It is good to have on record that those voting to leave the EU had a majority of 1.3 million. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, the vote was to remain, but the 1.3 million people who voted no—who voted for out—in Northern Ireland and Scotland made the difference in the whole United Kingdom. We have to keep it in
perspective. We took that decision collectively as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The decision has been made, let’s move on.

It is difficult to see an outcome where the UK would have regions staying in the EU and regions leaving the EU. Indeed, some of the most staunch remain campaigners are beginning to concede that fact at last. It is therefore now most important that the concerns voiced by all those in regions with specific relationships with the EU continue to enjoy the benefits that made the regions vote to remain in the first place. We have a task to do, but we can do that task. We can be positive and look forward with optimism to the future and how we can achieve those goals. Whether that means retaining, replicating or replacing, it is now the job of the Brexit negotiation team, the Department for Exiting the European Union and all those involved to make sure that any potentially negative outcomes are mitigated and reduced.

Gibraltar’s booming economy, which grew at more than 10% in the past year, relies on a large degree on the thousands of Spanish workers who cross the border every day. Some hon. Members in the Chamber today have attended Gibraltar events, where we had an opportunity to hear about some of the economic benefits coming to Gibraltar through their relationship with us in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is important that we focus on those things as well.

Thousands of Spanish workers cross the border every day. That needs to be factored into the Brexit process to ensure that Spanish people are not put off working in Gibraltar should there be a need for work permits. Christian Hernandez, president of the Chamber of Commerce on the Rock, said that the Rock’s thriving financial services sector is at risk, too. He claims:

“The whole way we’ve marketed the jurisdiction is as a gateway into Europe.”

There is a job to do, but we can look forward to it with confidence. Most industries will prove immune to Brexit. Roughly 90% of Gibraltar’s insurance and online betting business consists of transactions with Britain. Low tax rates will ultimately help keep firms in place. Again, there are many things we can do to ensure that that happens.

The reality of the economic situation in the neighbouring Spanish regions is likely to mute any real Spanish aggression. Gibraltar provides a whopping 25% of the economy of the neighbouring Spanish area of Campo de Gibraltar, and the region of Andalucía as a whole suffers 32% unemployment. The mayor of the border town of La Línea de la Concepción, Juan Franco, concedes:

“Our economy is completely dependent on Gibraltar.”

A 30-year-old resident of the same town, who commutes daily from La Línea to her waitressing job, has never been able to find a job in Spain. At 30 years old, it is staggering to hear her say:

“The only money I’ve ever earned is in Gibraltar.”

Some think the future will be brighter; let us be confident that it will be. With the support of the Government, we know that it can be. To give a couple of examples of major developments, a Shell-operated liquid natural gas terminal will come online by mid-2017, and a new secure data facility is housed deep within the Rock. The potential for Gibraltar is good. It is positive and we should be confident of where we are going.

The local Government hope to use their significant autonomy to forge tighter links with Morocco and other emerging economies in Africa and beyond. We all have to pay close attention to the Rock and give the people all the support that they need, but things are still certainly looking bright for Britain in the sun.

9.53 am

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) on securing this debate. Like him, I declare an interest, in this case as secretary of the all-party parliamentary group for Gibraltar. The visits I have made to Gibraltar are set out in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. It is appropriate that we should both speak in this debate because we took entirely different views on the referendum. However, we share a determination, now that the decision has been taken, to achieve the best possible deal for the people, economy and sovereignty of Gibraltar, which is a totally committed part of the British family. We seek to find constructive ways in which we can work with the Minister—I welcome him to his place. I share the sentiments that his father would be delighted to see him here, if perhaps a little surprised at the role he occupies, which means he will respond to the debate.

I want to stress two things. Given the decision, there are two practical issues that absolutely must be addressed on Gibraltar, the first of which is the freedom of movement across the frontier, which has been referred to. Although Spain has behaved badly in the past regardless of EU membership, we have been responsible for Gibraltar’s external relations and have at least been able to threaten the use of European law in relation to free movement. We will not have that valuable lever in the same way in future. Within the negotiation on the arrangements that we make to leave, we need a cast-iron safeguard that Gibraltar will be protected. It is different from anywhere else in the UK, as has been observed, because of the land border issue and because of the dependency of its economy on movement across the frontier—that dependency would exist even if, as my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke and I both hope, Gibraltar develops its economy and trade links beyond the EU as well as continuing those within. That movement will be necessary to service the economy come what may, so it absolutely must be maintained.

My second point concerns the importance for Gibraltar of achieving access to the single market in terms of passporting rights for financial services. That is as important to the Gibraltar economy as the financial services sector in the City of London and beyond is to the United Kingdom economy. The ask for the Government is, in the negotiations, for Gibraltar to achieve the same rights of access, especially around financial services, that we achieve for the City of London, and that Gibraltar is not, because of its small size, seen as a trade-off in the bigger game. Those are two key and practical objectives.

To do that, I suggest we need three or four things. First, Gibraltar must have full involvement rather than consultation, which was the phrase initially used—I am
glad that the Government have moved in that direction. That full involvement must be on the same basis in the negotiations as the other devolved Administrations within the United Kingdom. I hope the Minister, and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary take on board the importance of contradicting the assertion of the Spanish Foreign Minister, Señor García-Margallo, who was quoted as saying:

“...It must be made absolutely clear that Gibraltar is not part of the negotiations.”

We need to say it must be made absolutely clear that Gibraltar must be part of the negotiations and that there can be no movement on that.

The second thing we can do is ensure that that involvement is practical. It says a great deal for our Prime Minister that, on the morning before she went to Buckingham Palace to kiss hands, she took the trouble, while still Home Secretary, to meet personally with the Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister of Gibraltar. That sets a good tone. All of us who wish Gibraltar well cannot thank her enough for that effort. I know the Foreign Secretary has also met the Chief Minister, and I hope that the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union will also do so. That presence is really important. Perhaps at some point we will be able to have another prime ministerial visit to Gibraltar. Sadly, the visit by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr Cameron) was cut short because of tragic circumstances, which overshadowed what otherwise was an important statement during the referendum campaign.

The next practical thing, as my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke has already referred to, would be the swift conclusion of, in effect, a common market free trade agreement between Gibraltar and the UK. There is no legal impediment to our doing that while we remain within the European Union, so it does not have to wait for the article 50 process to go through. That is something we could get on with straight away. That is important because it would give a big confidence boost to Gibraltar’s economy.

The other thing we could do in terms of economic confidence is in relation to the British Government’s direct stake in the economy through the locally employed military personnel of the Ministry of Defence establishment there. I hope the Government will make it absolutely clear, that to resolve any uncertainty or pressures, under these circumstances there is no question whatever of any reduction in the workforce locally employed in the MOD establishment. That would certainly be the wrong thing to do, as many of us believe, in any circumstances, and certainly not now. That is entirely within the British Government’s gift to achieve immediately. I hope the Minister will be able to make those matters clear.

There are challenges and we must work together to meet them. The Government of Gibraltar and all parties in the Gibraltar Parliament are willing to do that. They have established a good relationship here. There is political uncertainty in Spain, and the double standards sometimes reflected in the Spanish Government’s dealings have been referred to. Of course, we will have to continue to work with Spain as a neighbour and an ally. It is a great shame that the attitude it adopts towards Gibraltar has sometimes clouded what could otherwise be useful and constructive relations, but that cannot get in the way of our basic commitment to people who have voted repeatedly to maintain British sovereignty, and it cannot get in the way of our obligation to them to achieve those practical and entirely achievable objectives on their behalf, which we can achieve provided there is the political will. I do not doubt the Minister’s personal commitment to that, and I hope he will signal very clearly the Government’s commitment to those objectives and practical endeavours.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. So that Members know, I intend to call the Front-Bench spokesmen to wound up no later than half-past 10.

10 am

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. The evening of the 23 June was a huge moment for this country. As a campaigner for leave, I was obviously delighted that Britain voted to follow a new path in the world, but we cannot deny that the people of Gibraltar voted by an overwhelming margin to remain in the EU.

Being so close to another EU country, the people of Gibraltar are right to have concerns about what leaving the EU means to them, but one thing is for sure: Gibraltar is British, Gibraltar will remain British and Gibraltar wants to remain British. In 2002, 99.5% of the population of Gibraltar voted to reject joint sovereignty with Spain. That was the second vote that the people of Gibraltar had taken on the subject. They first went to the polls to decide their sovereignty in 1967, when 99.6% of people voted to stay with Britain. Just 44 people voted to side with the Spanish; in 2002, that number was 187. Just 823 people voted to leave the EU on 23 June. Although that may still be a minority, it is definitely a much larger one. My point is that the people of Gibraltar are British, they feel British and their overwhelming view is that they want to remain British.

Let us not rehash the arguments of the referendum. Let us put it to one side and move on, accepting that the decision was taken as one nation and that now we must focus on making the best of it as one nation. Much as it does for the rest of the UK, leaving the European Union opens up a huge range of opportunities for Gibraltar. It now has the opportunity to expand its horizons beyond the northern border to opportunities in the south and the west, using its unique geopolitical position, in the corner of Europe, Africa and the Atlantic, to multiply the trade opportunities that were previously shackled by Brussels.

One example would be Morocco. Over the last decade, Morocco has significantly liberalised its trade regime and strengthened its financial sector. The Casablanca stock exchange is the second largest in Africa and aspires to be the regional hub. With Gibraltar’s strong financial sector, a well-negotiated treaty with Morocco could boost both the Gibraltarian and Moroccan economies. Thanks to the Prime Minister, we now have a Department for International Trade that is ready to strike those deals. Why, when we have the opportunity to expand our horizons in that way, would we look only to Gibraltar’s nearest neighbour? That is at the very heart of why we voted to leave the European Union. We voted to look up from the Brussels negotiating table and see the rest of the world and all the opportunities that it presents. Gibraltar can benefit from that, quite simply by being close to many of these growing markets.
We must obviously work to make sure that the concerns of the people of Gibraltar are recognised. That is why the Prime Minister has repeatedly asserted that we will not go ahead with any negotiations unless they involve every part of the United Kingdom, including Gibraltar.

Daniel Kawczynski: I very much agree with my hon. Friend’s sentiment that the United Kingdom can now use Gibraltar in partnership for engaging with Morocco. Morocco is a very stable, good ally of the United Kingdom. Does she agree that, going forward with the new Department, we can work in partnership with Gibraltar to penetrate the Moroccan market?

Andrea Jenkyns: I wholeheartedly agree. We will not go ahead with a deal that all the nations and territories that make up the UK are not happy with. It is in that spirit that I am delighted to hear the words of Daniel Feetham, the leader of the Opposition in Gibraltar, who said:

“We must deal in hope. We have a duty to set out a positive and workable road map for the future. I remain positive that we can do that.”

Those remarks show exactly the attitude that Government officials in areas that voted to remain should be taking—not talking about second referendums or somehow brokering a deal to keep other areas in the EU, but working together to create the best way forward for all parts of our nation. There is a lot to be positive about for Gibraltar outside the EU. I look forward to seeing what the future has in store.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) for calling this debate. The people of Gibraltar are British. They are not different from any of us here in this room or any of our constituents. What Her Majesty’s Government simply have to do at this point is to forget that Gibraltar is somehow different from our own United Kingdom. It may not be part of the United Kingdom constitutionally, but in every other sense Gibraltar is part of the Great British family. In any negotiations that are going to affect Gibraltar in the long term, as we discuss our new relationship with the EU and our new path that we are heading along in the wider world, we must include Gibraltar at every stage.

In previous discussions involving Gibraltar, I am afraid to say that our Foreign and Commonwealth Office has thought about Gibraltar at the end of the negotiations, not at the start. This time, things have to be different. I am delighted that Her Majesty’s Government have now made it clear that Gibraltar will be treated equally with every other part of the United Kingdom—Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and, of course, England. Gibraltar should be treated the same and should be included equally. I say to the Minister, who I welcome to his place—I know his father would be proud of him—those discussions at the start. If it is not, there is no question but that the Government in Madrid—particularly the existing Government—will try to scupper any negotiations by trying to force our Government to give some sort of concession over Gibraltar. That cannot happen and has to be ruled out immediately.

I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) has left, because what he said earlier was completely correct. Our FCO has pussyfooted around and been weak for far too long. When Spain shows aggression towards the people of Gibraltar, when it makes life difficult for the people of the Rock, when it stops legitimate travel from one side of the frontier to the other by creating artificial delays, and all the other tricks they play in trying to make life difficult for Gibraltar, we simply have to say to the Spanish, “If you do that to the Gibraltarians—if you make their life hard—you are going to feel the wrath of the British people.” We will not accept it, not at any time, now or in the future. If they treat Gibraltar like that, it is like treating the United Kingdom in that way.

Daniel Kawczynski: Does my hon. Friend agree that the infringements of Gibraltar’s maritime area by Spanish vessels are increasingly alarming, and that the FCO needs to do more to let Spain know that they will not be tolerated?

Andrew Rosindell: My hon. Friend is completely correct. Over the last 15 years as an MP, I have watched how Gibraltar has been treated, as I know you have, Mr Evans. I am afraid to say that we have let the people of Gibraltar down, because when we see incursions into British waters, we simply do not do very much. We might bring the ambassador in, tell him off and say that it is unacceptable, but we are never prepared to take firm action to show the Spanish Government that there are consequences. If they treat Gibraltar in this way, if they illegally allow vessels to go into British Gibraltar waters, and if they carry on making life tough for the people of the Rock and try to prevent them from being treated equally, we have to say that that is not acceptable. We have to show the Spanish that we are prepared to take retaliatory action if needed.

None of us in this Chamber wants to go down that route. Spain should be an ally of the United Kingdom and a friendly country, but it does not behave like that when it comes to Gibraltar. My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke is working to raise the issue of NATO flights, and those of us on the NATO Parliamentary Assembly are also going to take up that matter. Spain is supposed to be a NATO ally—a friendly country; a country with which we should be working closely—but how can we work with it if it singles out a section of the British family and effectively bullies them? That is not on, and no one in this House should be willing to stand by and let it happen for a moment longer.

So what should we do? There are lots of practical things we could do. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) spoke eloquently and listed a number of things that we should be doing. First, we can bilaterally agree a common market with Gibraltar. That would reassure it enormously, and would mean that any trading arrangements that are put in place apply as much to Gibraltar as to our own constituents.

Jack Lopresti: My hon. Friend is talking about the NATO context. Yes, Spain ought to be a friendly country and an ally. We are duty-bound and treaty-bound by
article 5 to come to its defence. If it were attacked by an external enemy, or any enemy, we would potentially send our people into harm’s way to defend it.

Andrew Rosindell: Absolutely. I believe the fact that Spain continues to behave in this manner is a complete breach of the spirit of the NATO treaty. It is very sad for the Spanish people that their Governments continually behave in this way. I do not think that the Spanish people—I speak to a lot of them—have that attitude. Certainly the people who live in La Linea and the Andalucia region do not have any animosity towards Gibraltar. In fact, their economy is dependent on it.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend is making a very important point. The attitude of the central Government in Madrid stands in marked contrast with that of the regional Government in Andalucia, which has always maintained very good relations, that of most of the neighbouring local authorities in the area, and that of the trade unions and most of the business community. The trouble is that Madrid does not seem to care about what happens in Andalucia and the Campo.

Andrew Rosindell: Sadly, my hon. Friend is correct. The Government in Madrid use Gibraltar as a political weapon. I say to the Spanish Government—I hope the Spanish ambassador is watching this debate—that it simply has to stop. Our leaving the European Union means that we can defend Gibraltar more strongly, because we have the power to act against Spain if it acts against British Gibraltarians. None of us wishes to go down the route of retaliatory action but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham said, we cannot pussyfoot any longer. We have to be clear that an attack on Gibraltar in any sense is an attack on the United Kingdom. We treat it equally to any other part of the British family.

Let me go back to the practical things that we can do to help Gibraltar immediately. Of course, as my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) made clear, the people of Gibraltar voted to stay in the European Union. I do not think they necessarily like the EU more than we do, but they are in a special situation: they have a frontier, and they are deeply fearful—and rightly so—that Spain will use the departure from the EU as an excuse to make life difficult and even to close the frontier. I understand 100% why the people of Gibraltar voted the way they did, and why they are so fearful for the future. We now have to do everything possible to help them.

I hope the Minister will quickly take up the common market idea, which the Chief Minister, Fabian Picardo, has been promoting. Let us try to do these things quickly. Let us not wait. Let us rein back any suggestion that the jobs of the locally employed civilian staff on the military side in Gibraltar will be lost. The people of the Rock are dependent on the financial services and gambling industries, so we must do all we can to protect them. At the end of the day, we have a duty of responsibility to Gibraltar, so we cannot let it lose its financial self-sufficiency and its status in the world—I did not know this until yesterday, but it is the wealthiest part of the globe per capita. It is an enormous success story, and we should be proud of what it has achieved. When the military bases were taken away, it had to regenerate its financial services, gambling and other industries to be self-sufficient. Gibraltar does not depend on the UK Government. It is not like the one or two of our overseas territories that still depend on financial support. It is self-sufficient and wants to remain so. We have a duty and a responsibility—it is in our interests—to make sure it does.

There are other things we can do. I again raise a point that I have raised with previous Ministers. I find it outdated that the people of an overseas territory—particularly Gibraltar—have no voice in this Parliament. There is not even a dedicated Select Committee that deals with overseas territories. There is no elected representation from overseas territories in the UK Parliament. We are the only country in the world with overseas territories that denies them the right to have a voice and some form of representation in Parliament. Gibraltar had to fight very hard to get a voice in the European Parliament. In the end, an MEP—or a share of an MEP—was granted for Gibraltar as part of the South West region. We make decisions about defence, foreign policy, the control of sterling, which Gibraltar uses, and many other things besides, but it is not possible for a Gibraltarian to stand in this Chamber and speak for Gibraltar. It is great that there are so many friends of Gibraltar here, but there should be a mechanism for Gibraltar and the Chief Minister to formally come here and speak for themselves. All sorts of options about how we can include Gibraltar—and, indeed, other overseas territories—after leaving the European Union should be on the table.

Among our overseas territories, Gibraltar is by far the most important issue in relation to Brexit. However, I ask the Minister not to forget that there are 21 territories and dependencies, all of which are nervous about the implications for them if we leave the European Union. Gibraltar is by far the most important one in this context, because it is part of the EU, but I ask the Minister not to forget the Crown dependencies—the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey—because protocol 3 allows them access to free trade with Europe. Equally, other overseas territories, in particular the Falklands, have concerns too.

Jack Lopresti: I take issue with my hon. Friend’s statement that Gibraltar does not have a voice here. There is an all-party group, and it has friends and allies in both Houses. I think he needs to clarify that saying it does not have a directly mandated representative is very different from saying it does not have a voice in this place.

Andrew Rosindell: My hon. Friend is completely right. The all-party group on Gibraltar, which he ably chairs, is one of the most effective groups in the Houses of Parliament. In that sense, Gibraltar has a stronger voice than almost anywhere, because there are so many of us who support it. I am delighted that all parties support Gibraltar, particularly friends from the Scottish National party, the Ulster Unionists and the Labour party, although there are not many Labour Members here today—

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Quality, not quantity.

Daniel Kawczynski: My hon. Friend is too modest to say this, but he has spent a huge amount of time campaigning for Gibraltar, certainly over the last 11 years for which I have been a Member of Parliament. We are
reducing the number of MPs in the House of Commons from 650 to 600, but is he saying that we ought to have a dedicated Member of Parliament sent by Gibraltar to this Chamber?

Andrew Rosindell: I do not see any arguments why Gibraltar should not have its own Member of Parliament. We now have a devolved United Kingdom, with a lot of powers devolved to Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. I can see no logical reason why, at a general election, the people of Gibraltar should not be able to send their own representative to Parliament, just as territories of other countries are able to do. That, however, is a debate not for today, but to be put on the table as something to be considered.

At the end of the day, we have a duty and a responsibility, because the people of Gibraltar are not foreign. They are not from a different country; they are part of our family. The one message that we must send out loud and clear from this place is that, whatever happens in the next two years, the people of Gibraltar will be given the same consideration—equal precedence—as we would expect for our own constituents. We cannot find people in the British family who are more loyal and more dedicated to the United Kingdom, to upholding the British Crown and British values, and to serving in Her Majesty’s armed forces—equal to Northern Ireland, or even to Romford; no question. Whatever we feel about other issues, the one thing that we have a duty to do is to ensure that when the negotiations take place, Gibraltar is not, and is never, forgotten.

10.21 am

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am particularly pleased to see you in the Chair, Mr Evans. I also welcome the Minister to his place. He is a man whose career I have watched since he was first elected in 2010 and, to echo the words of many, his father would indeed be proud of him. I thank the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) for securing the debate, which is important, timely and perhaps one we should have had before the Brexit referendum. However, we are having it now and, as with many other things, we are having to think about the implications of Brexit after the referendum.

I should say that, like the hon. Gentleman, the chair of the all-party group, I have visited Gibraltar as a guest of its Government. I have made a speech in Casemates Square, in front of about 10,000 people, calling on Gibraltar to become a member of UEFA and on UEFA to overlook any quarrels with Spain. I put one condition on that, and the Gibraltarians have not broken it, which is that they must not beat Scotland in any game.

I overlooked the club aspect, however, and, as a Celtic supporter, I feel that I should have put in a caveat about Lincoln Red Imps ever playing Celtic. Last week, I was stunned to see Celtic lose 1-0 to Lincoln Red Imps—a result I hope will be overturned tonight, if that does not upset friends in Gibraltar too much—which shows that we have to tread carefully, because we cannot foresee the implications of our words, much like the implications of a Brexit exit. The referendum has many such implications.

To put football to one side—it is a bit of a sore point—and speeding on, we know from the referendum that 96% of Gibraltarians wanted to remain in the EU. I heard the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) saying that they probably do not like the EU much, but I often reflect on that point when I hear people at all sorts of levels complaining about all sorts of levels of government: in Scotland, they complain about the local councils; they even complain, believe it or not, about the Scottish Government, although very little; of course, they make massive complaints about the Government in Westminster; and there are some complaints about Europe, although those are not as great as the ones about Westminster. The radicalisation done by the tabloid press, however, magnifies the European ones to a greater extent than many of the other complaints, so it is important to keep them in perspective.

The prospect of leaving the European Union has created real alarm in Gibraltar. The root of that alarm, which has not been touched on today, is the feeling that the border could close, resulting in the economic stagnation of Gibraltar. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), in an exchange with the hon. Member for Romford, pointed out the benefits to Andalucía, and La Línea in particular, from 11,000 people crossing the frontier daily. Those crossings are very important not only to La Línea, but to Gibraltar, because the essence of the exchange in business and trade is that both parties benefit.

The problem was emphasised, I think by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, who said that the Madrid Government simply do not care—the Governments of Andalucía and of Gibraltar care, but, unfortunately, in Madrid they are still playing an empire game. That imperialist mindset should have gone, given the changes in south America and most of the rest of the Spanish empire, but residues are left—isolated rockpools of thinking. Gibraltar, I am afraid, is a victim of such a rockpool.

Spain will, I hope, think and act maturely, because—the hon. Member for Romford said something similar—friends of mine in Spain do not have that attitude towards Gibraltar at all. In fact, in La Línea, people have a very practical attitude towards Gibraltar. Furthermore, the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, Fabian Picardo, has said that if given the opportunity of further co-operation with Spain, he could double the amount of jobs he has given to people in La Línea.

Gibraltar is an economic magnet, but it cannot itself find the workforce necessary to service its own job needs. In some ways, the situation is similar to that of our friends in Iceland, who find that their economy is growing so fast at the moment that about 10% of the population are migrants who have to come in to service Iceland’s need. Gibraltar needs migrants daily; it cannot house them, but, fortunately, just over the frontier people are living who can migrate, or commute, daily for work. That is important to remember, because there we have the nub of the fear about Gibraltar’s problem: if the frontier closes, the economic stagnation of Gibraltar could happen.

If that happened, the prosperity of Gibraltar, which we have talked about, would evaporate and disappear. The responsible thing for Europe as a whole to do, as mentioned by several speakers, is to ensure that that does not happen. Okay, Ireland has three times the
growth of the UK and Iceland double the growth, but at the moment the UK and other countries in Europe generally do not have the best of economic situations—in the Iberian peninsula, in particular. To see a honeypot, which is what Gibraltar is, in any way threatened, or even talk of being threatened, is absolute madness on stilts. I hope the Government in Madrid will listen to the Government of Andalucía and take cognisance, so as to ensure that any damage to the economy does not occur.

Gibraltar is an interesting place, as many of us who have visited know: it is British, but not in the UK. That is a very happy circumstance, which I hope Scotland will emulate someday—being British, but not in the UK, as Norway or Sweden are Scandinavian, but not in any Scandinavian political union. That is a way for Scotland to go, so there is a lot that Scotland can learn from Gibraltar about being British but not in the UK. More and more people are looking to Gibraltar for a good example of where to go, and I understand that the people of Gibraltar are looking to Scotland—I hope to touch on that later.

Gibraltar is a nuanced place. I had a moment of mutual fun with a Member from Northern Ireland, who should perhaps remain nameless, when we walked into a café in Gibraltar. There on the wall was a picture of Her Majesty the Queen, which in Northern Ireland means something very particular, but on the other wall was a picture of the Pope. That shows the nuanced history of Gibraltar and its differences from other places. That should be borne in mind: Gibraltar is its own place. It is not an arm or satellite of ours; it is its own place, with its own right of self-determination. If the people of Gibraltar choose to have a close connection with the United Kingdom and to London or wherever, that has to be respected.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Before I make any comment, I should point out that, like my hon. Friend, I have been a guest of the Gibraltar Government on the same terms as the chair of the all-party group.

On the subject of the sense of place, and the rights of and responsibilities for Gibraltar, does my hon. Friend agree that the overwhelming democratic will of the people of Gibraltar, as stated in the European referendum, must absolutely be respected? It is our responsibility, and an obligation, to ensure that we carry forward their clear message.

Mr MacNeil: Indeed. I absolutely agree. The hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) and the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst have talked about Gibraltar being fully involved in the negotiations, on the same terms as Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The only caveat that I would add is that I do not think Scotland is overly optimistic of having an equal voice. The UK is a family of nations, not a nation, as was mentioned earlier and as we were of course told before our independence referendum. In the European Union, unlike in the United Kingdom, one member’s will is not imposed on other members. That would never be tolerated in Europe, where members are sovereign, but it is tolerated in the United Kingdom, where some members impose on others exactly what their constitutional future will be. The UK perhaps has a lot to learn from the European Union model, and indeed from the words of respect that we heard from the hon. Member for Romford, who talked about overseas territories and people perhaps being governed in a looser family. That is perhaps developmental work for the years to come.

Gibraltarians of course have British nationality; I understand that they have been guaranteed full citizenship since 1981. Gibraltar joined the European Union through the European Communities Act 1972, as a dependent territory of the UK, without, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, the customs union, the common agricultural policy or the fisheries policy, although the common agricultural policy does not apply very much to Gibraltar, in that no one could really plough a yard of it. It is, as it says on the tin, a rock. That is probably further testament to its economic success.

Mention has also been made of the idea of the Spanish flag being closer to flying on Gibraltar. The attitude from Madrid—this applies regardless of the country or place to the imperialistic idea that a country can take over somebody else’s will or right to self-determination—utterly sticks in any democrat’s craw. It should not take advantage a technicality, which is what I call the UK’s departure from the European Union. Of course, it is not a technicality in respect of Gibraltar, but for Madrid to see that possibility in that technicality and to make mischief is reprehensible. We must remember that we are talking about machismo in Madrid, and I call on it just to drop that. The empire attitude is gone. An awful lot of nations have given up their empire stuff. Denmark did so 200 years ago and the UK did so—I hope—50 years ago, and for Madrid to maintain a little bit of it is really not useful or helpful at all.

There has been a lot of good will towards Gibraltar in the debate, which is nice, kind and thoughtful, and it is definitely appreciated, but it is not leverage. The UK has given up a lot of leverage by leaving the EU or by threatening to do so. There is concern that the border will close, and I say respectfully to the Minister, whom I like personally, that his muscle and the UK’s impact are not what they could have been if we had voted to remain a member of the European Union. I would not like to see the Gibraltarian economy strangled. We need voices here—in fact, we need voices all over Europe—supporting Gibraltar. We want to hear democrats not just here but in other places across Europe supporting Gibraltar. The people of Gibraltar have the right to move in and out of Gibraltar. It is a small place. Many of them holiday up the coast in Spain, bringing it further prosperity, and Spain’s behaviour is not really what we are looking for.

What is the hope for Gibraltar? From my perspective as a Scottish National party Member—I thank the hon. Member for Romford for acknowledging and taking cognisance of our interest—Gibraltarian’s hopes are severalfold. I think that Gibraltarians hope that the Royal Navy immediately will be a bit tougher on incursions. I have a friend—others may know this individual too—called Dale Villa, who was on a jet ski and was chased into the harbour of Gibraltar by the Guardia Civil and had either live ammunition or rubber bullets shot at him. That is totally unacceptable. The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) was quite right to say that Spain really has to step up to the mark and be seen as a responsible member of NATO.
On responsibility, I am glad that the First Minister of Scotland has been in close contact with the Chief Minister of Gibraltar. It is no secret to anyone in this House that we hope for independence for Scotland. We hope to become a sovereign nation, as are the other 27 members of the European Union. If Scotland indeed does become an independent nation, we will be aware of our responsibilities, duties and friendships in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Iceland, Norway, the Isle of Man and particularly places such as Gibraltar. Gibraltar obviously has concerns, but if it needed help, I hope—although it might be difficult—that Scotland would look to offer that help and would not run away from being helpful to Gibraltar in the future if the people of Gibraltar so decided.

With tongue in cheek, some people might say that I am angling for a Scottish Gibraltar rather than a British Gibraltar, but I am not at all. The issue is not about the idea of territory or whatever, because at the end of the day it is absolutely meaningless. It is about respecting the rights of the people of Gibraltar to live the lives they want. On that point, the 1713 treaty of Utrecht is often mentioned, but it should be buried and forgotten about. It states:

“And in case it shall hereafter seem meet to the Crown of Great Britain to grant, sell or by any means to alienate therefrom…the said town of Gibraltar, it is hereby agreed and concluded that the preference of having the sale shall always be given to the Crown of Spain before any others.”

That treaty has been superseded in many ways. The French had promised not to aid the Jacobites, but within years—about a year or two later—they did. Perhaps I am happy about that, but in the decades afterwards, the treaty of Utrecht in principle was in shreds in many places, and it is definitely in shreds now because of the UN position on self-determination of peoples. The most important thing is the 1969 Gibraltar constitution. We go over for Gibraltar’s national day, which is on 10 September. That shows that Gibraltar is a very different place and has its own say. As my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) said, it has its own sense of place, and as democrats, we must respect that.

I end on this point. The people of Gibraltar are looking at Scotland, and indeed some of them are looking at the SNP. I say to them again, “You’re welcome.” Those in Gibraltar who have already joined, but particularly those who have not, should look at snp.org/join and tell their friends. In Scotland, and certainly in the Scottish Members of the UK Parliament—wherever we find ourselves in the future—Gibraltar has a friend. I plead with other capitals across the European Union also to be friends of Gibraltar, and to understand and respect the wishes of the people of Gibraltar. That point—that we must respect the wishes of the people of Gibraltar—must be heard in Madrid from all quarters.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) on securing the debate, which is necessary in the context of what is being called nervousness. I am looking forward to hearing from the Minister, and I congratulate him on his new role. I look forward to enjoying many a debate with him in Westminster Hall. I do not know whether his title is hereditary, but as his father was also a Member of Parliament, I congratulate him on continuing that line.

May I begin by talking about this concept of nervousness? My constituents in Hornsey and Wood Green voted similarly to the Gibraltarians. One of our polling stations, in Highgate, had 90% turnout, which was above Gibraltar’s 83.5% turnout, and 75% of people in the Haringey local authority area voted to remain in the European Union, so I understand why there is a sense of nervousness and why this debate is necessary.

On a more practical note, I am pleased that the Foreign Secretary met the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, Fabian Picardo, in London on 16 July and reassured him of the Government’s “steadfast commitment to Gibraltar, and…intention to fully involve Gibraltar in discussions” on the UK’s future relationship with the European Union. The Foreign Secretary also emphasised:

“The people of Gibraltar have repeatedly and overwhelmingly expressed their wish to remain under British sovereignty”—that is clear from the earlier referendum—“and we will respect their wishes.”

In the spirit of working together to get a solution following the 23 June vote, Opposition Members will want to work carefully and closely on the detail of what it will mean for Gibraltar to leave the European Union.

To pick up points made in the debate, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about a proper conversation with Spain. It would be welcome to see at some point a sense that the trilateral conversation is happening again. I know the situation is fraught, but it is important to talk and have discussions, yet the tone is crucial, so I hope Members here will be helpful in that regard. We must remember the geography of Gibraltar and the fact that so many people from Spain are intimately involved, with up to 12,000 residents from Andalucia crossing to work on the Rock on a daily basis. We want to get towards a practical discussion about what the new reality means on a day-to-day basis.

The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), in his usual way, gave us five points to think about—it is always helpful to outline them in that way. Of course, freedom of movement is the big one and it is one of the most significant things we will have to think about nationally as well. The second is dependency and trade links. Like the City of London, Gibraltar has very much a services-based economy. The hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) quite correctly suggested the Moroccan market, which is something we need to look at carefully in considering the possible ramifications for the technicalities of leaving the European Union—I wish it was all just technicalities and that there was not the dampening effect that we currently see on our economy.

On the principle of full involvement in negotiations, once again, somehow we need to get the trilateral conversation going again with more energy. I look forward to the Minister commenting on that—where he thinks we are at and where we need to go—and re-emphasise the importance of the tone of those discussions. I would also be happy to hear what he thinks about the
free trade agreement between the UK and Gibraltar—a kind of mini-common market. The important thing is that we keep all options on the table and continue to talk, and that people do not feel as though there is a big gap, but that we keep the energy going around our common economic and prosperity agenda.

Finally, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst quite rightly raised the issue of Ministry of Defence personnel. We would not want there to be any nervousness or injure any sense of questioning into that relationship, particularly as regards the families based there. Certainly we on the Labour Benches want to see continuity, not massive change. It is far too early to talk about any change in that regard, but it is quite correct that he raised that today, so as to reassure the families and communities.

We are committed to working through these issues as they come up. It is clear that 24 June was not a fist-pumping moment for the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green. It was not independence day for us in Hornsey and Wood Green—I had people crying on my shoulder when I went to the local shop to buy a pint of milk. It has been quite a difficult time. Indeed, today I have my first meeting of the all-party group for the European Union post-23 June. However, what is important about the House of Commons is that we debate and talk about things and keep all options open while maintaining a sense that our economy, prosperity and trade relations are extremely important in that regard, as is the sentiment around how we will cope, post the referendum vote.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): In welcoming the Minister to his new role, like everyone else here today, may I remind him that it is customary to leave a minute at the end for the proposer of the motion?

10.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Thank you very much, Mr Evans. It is a pleasure and a privilege to serve under your chairmanship. It is also a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West). She said in an earlier interjection that it was quality rather than quantity from the Labour Benches and I think she was spot-on in that comment. She also spoke about nervousness in the aftermath of the referendum. I have to say that she demonstrated substantially less nervousness than I feel in speaking from the Front Bench for the first time.

I thank and congratulate my hon. friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) on his brilliant work in securing this debate and leading the all-party group for Gibraltar. Our hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) said that Gibraltar does not always have a voice in this House, but he ensures, as do all Members here today, that it has a powerful voice in the House. I know that one of his first visits on being elected to Parliament was to Gibraltar. He has visited numerous times since and he does a magnificent job of speaking up for the people of Gibraltar and their concerns in the Chamber. I want to channeled the energy and passion that he has shown, along with other Members in the Chamber, in standing to represent the Government.

As ever, my hon. Friend the Member for Romford contributed powerfully to the debate. I assure him that we will engage on the issues of concern that he raises. I pay tribute to the work over many years of my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), who did a great deal on Gibraltar, representing its interests in the UK’s relationship with the EU—indeed, he was often called the Minister for Westminster Hall in many debates about EU matters in this Chamber, including three specific Gibraltar debates. I look forward to working with his successor, the new Minister for Europe, for whom I have a number of messages from the debate on Gibraltar business in future.

I am delighted to speak for the first time for the Department for Exiting the European Union, working with our new Secretary of State in partnership with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the new Department for International Trade. My new Department has four main aims: to lead the policy work to support the UK’s negotiations to leave the EU and to establish the future relationship between the EU and the UK; to work closely with the UK Parliament, devolved Administrations, overseas territories and Crown dependencies and a wide range of other interested parties on what our approach to negotiations should be; to conduct the negotiations in support of the Prime Minister, including supporting our bilateral discussions on EU exit with other European countries; and to lead and co-ordinate cross-Government work to seize the opportunities and ensure a smooth process of exit on the best possible terms. We have heard in the debate that those terms need to include the best possible terms for Gibraltar.

The new Department will equip the UK to prepare to make a success of leaving the European Union, to meet the challenges and to seize the opportunities that that represents, some of which we have heard about today. As a Minister in this new Department, I welcome the opportunity to hear Members’ interests, concerns and ideas about the impact of the UK’s exit from the EU. It is of course early days—our Department is in the process of being formed and shaped, and there will be a period of extensive consultation ahead of us—but I am pleased to begin today with this important debate. It reflects the significance of Gibraltar that it is the subject of the very first debate in the history of our new Department.

The Secretary of State, whom I am privileged to work with, is no stranger to Gibraltar. He spent a number of years as Minister for Gibraltar. Indeed, if hon. Members look at Hansard from 29 November 1995, they will find an example where 8,000 Gibraltarians took to the streets to demonstrate in favour of his policies, which is probably a record few other Ministers have achieved.

This debate is timely. The British people have voted to leave the European Union and their will must be respected. As the Prime Minister said, “Brexit means Brexit.” The treaties of the European Union apply to Gibraltar by virtue of the UK’s membership. Clearly, Gibraltar’s relationship with the European Union will need to change and it is right that we should involve Gibraltar fully in that process.

Before I embark on the core of my response, it is right to recognise the result of the referendum in Gibraltar, as the Opposition spokesman did. Given that such a huge proportion of voters in Gibraltar backed remaining in the European Union, many people—as Members
from all sides have acknowledged—will no doubt feel frustrated that their view was not reflected by the majority in the UK. I know many on the Rock will feel concern about the future.

I make no secret of the fact that, like 96% of the population of Gibraltar, I voted to remain, but now there can no longer be leavers and remainers. Now the decision has been made, and it is the responsibility of all of us to secure the best possible outcome in the national interest of all UK citizens. We all need to work together to pursue this bold and positive new agenda. I am here today to demonstrate our commitment to ensure that the interests of Gibraltar and its citizens are protected and advanced.

It was right to put the decision to the British people and it was right to put the decision to voters in Gibraltar, alongside their counterparts in the United Kingdom. While Gibraltarians did not get their desired outcome, I am pleased they were able to play their part in this historic decision. The speeches we have heard in this Chamber reflect our determination to make it work for them.

I now want to deal with some of the detailed issues raised in today’s debate. I want first to make it clear that the outcome of the referendum does not affect or in any way diminish our steadfast and long-standing commitment to Gibraltar and its people. Since 1713, the United Kingdom has always stood by Gibraltar, and we always will. The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green mentioned the meeting in London between the Foreign Secretary and the Chief Minister of Gibraltar on Saturday 16 July. The Government’s assurance on sovereignty, which is well known, has not been changed in the least by the outcome of the referendum. We will never enter into arrangements under which the people of Gibraltar would pass under the sovereignty of another state against their wishes. Nor will the UK enter into any process of sovereignty negotiations with which Gibraltar is not content. In short, the United Kingdom will continue to protect the right of the people of Gibraltar to remain British for as long as they want to. We will take whatever action is necessary to safeguard Gibraltar, its people and its economy.

Several hon. Members commented on incursions. It is absolutely right to continue to stand up strongly to those, and I will make sure that officials relay the strong views that I have heard in the Chamber, from my hon. Friends the Members for Romford and for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and others, about the need to be robust in standing up to incursions. That will be communicated to both the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

As we prepare for the process of exit from the EU and negotiation of future trading arrangements with its members, we will fully involve Gibraltar, to ensure that its interests are properly taken into account. In practice, that means that whatever format is established in negotiations with the European Union, as we prepare for the process we will work in partnership with the Government of Gibraltar, to ensure that we have a shared understanding of their interests and objectives. Discussions have already begun, and I have no doubt that they will continue throughout the summer. We will work together to consider all the options for Gibraltar.

I was pleased to note that, as has already been commented on, one of the Prime Minister’s last engagements as Home Secretary was a meeting with the Chief Minister. I think that is a good start to the relationship between the Prime Minister and the Government of Gibraltar.

Gibraltar’s economy has rightly been praised for its strength and success in recent years. It is important to make it clear that there will be no immediate change in the way Gibraltar’s people can travel or the way its services can be sold. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke pointed out the importance of the border with Spain and ensuring that it functions properly. As many hon. Members pointed out, that border is also hugely important to the thousands of Spanish workers who cross every day to work in Gibraltar. It is in the interest of the economy of Spain, Andalucia and the whole region that it is made to work. That is why maintaining a fully functioning border remains one of our top priorities, and we believe it should be a priority for the Spanish Government as well. I am pleased to say that delays at the border have dropped to levels similar to those of before the summer of 2013, but we are not in the least complacent and we continue to monitor the situation carefully.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) made an interesting point about financial passporting. We need to take that into account carefully as we look at the proposals for a UK-Gibraltar common market. I welcome the Chief Minister’s proposal for a common market between the UK and Gibraltar and the support that the proposal has received today—not surprisingly—from across the House. The Chief Minister is understandably keen to demonstrate that whatever relationship is ultimately reached between the UK, Gibraltar and the EU, trade between the UK and Gibraltar will be able to continue as it always has. I want to assure right hon. and hon. Members that the UK Government are continuing to analyse that important but quite technical proposal as a matter of urgency. We will work closely with our friends in Gibraltar as we move forward. The point that was made—that we should listen to the concerns of the Gibraltar Chamber of Commerce—is a good one. I undertake that we will do that. Knowing the strength of the financial services, it is important to listen to Gibraltar when we have conversations about passporting.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) pointed out—very well, I thought—there are wider opportunities. As we have debates on leaving the European Union, we must ensure that we look at the opportunities, as well as the challenges, and maximise them for the whole United Kingdom, including its overseas territories and Crown dependencies, and certainly including Gibraltar.

In summary, the United Kingdom deeply values British sovereignty over Gibraltar and is fully committed to promoting the interests of all Gibraltarians. We will work in close partnership with the Government of Gibraltar to ensure that its interests are properly taken into account in the forthcoming negotiations with the European Union. Together, we will continue to explore ways to ensure that trade continues between the UK and Gibraltar, in the same way it does now. There are many unknowns as we start along the path of leaving the European Union. We do not yet know what the
terms of our deal with the EU will look like. However, the UK Government will do their utmost to get the best possible deal for Gibraltar, working closely with our friends on the Rock. The people of Gibraltar have built their remarkable success story through hard work, ingenuity, resilience and adaptability. I know that Gibraltar and Gibraltarians will rise to the challenge again and make British Gibraltar even stronger. Our commitment to Gibraltar remains solid as a rock.

10.55 am

Jack Lopresti: Thank you for your excellent chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank all hon. Members from across the House for their support today on this important and crucially timed debate. I am grateful for the Minister’s summing up remarks, in which he reaffirmed the British Government’s commitment to the people of Gibraltar and their sovereignty and freedom, and to working towards the best possible deal. What I want to say to them is: “We understand your concerns and fears, but let us work together, for what I think is an amazing, historic opportunity to thrive and prosper as a free people once again.”

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the effect of the EU referendum on Gibraltar.
of Glasgow, which is in my constituency, gave his view that the estimates process is completely irrelevant to the Barnett process. That view is borne out in other evidence we received and stands in complete contradiction to what the House, the Scottish National party and Scottish Members in particular were told during the English votes for English laws process, which was that our opportunity to scrutinise the consequences of EVEL legislation would be through the estimates process.

Margaret Ferrier: It is good to see a member of the Procedure Committee here today. He will be fully up to speed with everything that is happening there. We look forward to the report—we hope that it will be published in November this year—and I hope the Government listen to its recommendations and respond constructively.

As I said, three days is completely inadequate. Furthermore, it is an oddity that more time is given to supplementary estimates than main estimates. After all, main estimates are where the vast majority of the decision making occurs. It seems eminently logical to switch the number of days available at the very least, so that two are set aside for consideration of main estimates and one for supplementary estimates. My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), the SNP shadow Leader of the House, who has joined us in this debate, has submitted written evidence to the Procedure Committee’s inquiry into the estimates procedure in which he makes a common-sense proposal to allow both Opposition days and Backbench Business Committee days during the estimates windows, which should take the form of amendable or debatable motions to approve estimates or parts of estimates.

My hon. Friend also advocated the case advanced by the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), back in 2012 for the establishment of a separate Budget Committee to examine Government expenditure plans and to make recommendations to the House. I, too, think that has great merit and warrants serious consideration. It is currently all too easy for the Treasury to bury important changes within hundreds of pages of information. We owe it to the taxpayer to ensure both transparency and effective scrutiny, neither of which are possible in the current system. A Budget Committee would allow for a much more thorough inspection of spending proposals and could complement a heavily reformed Supply and estimates process. Such a Committee should also play a vital role in the scrutiny of Barnett consequentials to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Furthermore, Westminster should introduce a proper Budget expenditure debate, such as those held in the United States or the Scottish Parliament. That sensible measure would allow a much closer assessment of spending. The compelling case for the inclusion of Barnett consequentials in estimates has been further compounded by the introduction of English votes for English laws. The complicated EVEL process reduces the ability of Scottish MPs to influence matters with funding implications for Scotland. The Leader of the House has repeatedly claimed that the estimates process provides a suitable avenue for us to affect those matters of great financial importance. However, in reality, it does not.

The Chair of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), said during an oral evidence session of that Committee last September: “The way we execute Estimates and appropriations is less than satisfactory in the House of Commons, and for those colleagues who are concerned about Barnett consequentials, perhaps the concerns could be alleviated if we had proper debates around supply procedure.” Legislation that might be considered to fall within the rules for the exclusion of non-English MPs might have important expenditure implications for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The previous Leader of the House showed reticence in accepting that fact. I urge the new Leader of the House to give proper consideration to the argument being put forward. Will he agree to review the interaction between the Supply and estimates procedure and EVEL arrangements as part of the review of the latter?

Legislation passes through the House that could have a significant impact on the block grant available to the devolved legislators. Members who represent constituencies in the devolved nations are now denied a right to vote at crucial stages of that legislation. Many other Members and I have raised serious concerns regarding Barnett consequentials and the effect that such legislation could have upon them. The Government contend that the estimates process provides ample opportunity for all Members to address that. However, there exists a complete lack of relevant information available to Members regarding amounts derived from each Department’s spending, which makes up elements of the block grants. That is wholly inadequate.

Pursuant to Budgets and autumn statements each year, the Treasury provides information to the devolved Administrations of the amount within the block grant derived from the spending of each Department. However, Members of this Parliament are not given access to that information when they are asked to give formal approval to Government spending. It seems incomprehensible that absolutely no consideration is possible of the full implications of Government spending, including the effect on the budgets of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Will the Leader of the House engage with the Treasury specifically on that issue?

The current measures for the estimates day debates were put in place before the process of establishing separate legislatures for the devolved nations commenced, so there is a fundamental inadequacy in how we examine Barnett consequentials under the current process. As a member of the Scottish Affairs Committee, I heard evidence last September from Sir William McKay, who said: “There is neither possibility nor opportunity” to do so, and that “estimates opportunities are limited in both time and matter.” In fact, he commented that EVEL is “a dog’s breakfast”—a phrase my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire loves to use in the Chamber.

In evidence recently given to the Procedure Committee, Dr Joachim Wehner, associate professor of public policy at the London School of Economics, said: “The UK generally does extremely well in terms of macro fiscal disclosure, but it does less well when you look at the details of public spending. That is a weak spot in the overall transparency assessment of the UK. So the quality of the estimates is below par compared to the UK’s own high standards in this area, but also compared to its peers and other OECD countries.”
The mother of Parliaments, like many mothers, is not as in touch with the modern world as its younger descendants. The OECD wrote that we have some of the worst levels of scrutiny of estimates of any country in the developed democratic world. The House does not formally consider, debate, amend and vote on expenditure in the same way as with the Budget and taxation. There simply must be more opportunity to consider, debate and make amendments. MPs should have some measures to amend or affect estimates short of attempting to vote down all Government spending. There must be a way for Members to amend spending without having to defeat the Government on a major money motion. If nothing else, such a system makes minority Budgets much harder and, in doing so, cements a tendency in this place to move towards a two-party system with power pooling with the Executive. That is not a healthy way for a democratic country to operate.

Before I summarise, I would like to quote Adam Tomkins MSP, professor of public law at the University of Glasgow and the Scottish Conservative spokesperson on the constitution. In his written evidence to the Procedure Committee, he said:

"Whether these procedures give MPs the means fully to scrutinise any Barnett consequentials of England-only or England and Wales-only legislation may be doubted. If they prove to be inadequate, it may be that one unintended consequence of EVEL will be to reform the House of Commons’ supply process. From the perspective of parliamentary openness and effective parliamentary scrutiny, that would be no bad thing. The Treasury, however, may take a different view.”

I urge the Leader of the House to engage specifically with the Treasury about reforms to the timing and presentation of estimates, including the case for draft estimates, and the need for clear information on Barnett consequentials, including a statement of change from the previous year. Will he agree to examine specifically any lessons that can be learned from the Scottish Parliament’s procedures on the consideration of spending? Will he agree to engage with the Procedure Committee about the likely recommendations of its current inquiry on this matter?

Will the Leader of the House agree to look at the arrangement for estimates days, with a view to increasing the number available and making more time for main estimates than supplementary ones? Will he have discussions with the Treasury, with a view to making estimates motions more easily amendable? Will he seek to engage with relevant parties to explore the merits of establishing a Budget Committee? Lastly, will he agree to review the interaction between Supply and estimates procedure and the arrangements for English votes for English laws as part of the review of the latter?

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I welcome the Deputy Leader of the House to his new role.

11.11 am

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Evans. It is a particular pleasure to appear before you for my first debate as Deputy Leader of the House of Commons. I recall your visiting my constituency, Northampton North, some eight or nine years ago—I remain grateful for that.

It is a great pleasure to take part in this debate, and I take this opportunity to congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on not only securing it, which is in itself an achievement in a busy legislative agenda, but also on her contribution. As she alluded to, this topic is not perhaps of interest to every Member, but it has become higher on the agenda of many, thanks in large part to her work and the work of her hon. Friends, which I recognise. She has, in her short time here, made a powerful impact on this area of procedure, and I commend her for that.

The Supply and estimates procedure is attracting attention across the House now and has done historically. It is important at the outset to outline, as has been recognised, that the Procedure Committee is currently conducting an inquiry on the subject. The fact that the inquiry is under way is a recognition that there are areas that need to be examined. Knowing as I do the members of that Committee—some quite well, and others by reputation—I have every confidence that the Committee will look thoroughly at the matter in hand. It has been and is still doing so. I am sure it would be recognised that nothing I say must prejudge that inquiry.

It is particularly relevant to point out that the Leader of the House has not yet given evidence before the Procedure Committee. The previous Leader of the House was scheduled to do so, and the matter was put back. The new Leader of the House, appointed in the past few days, is scheduled to give evidence before that Committee on this subject in the autumn. We have to be cognisant that nothing should prejudice the pending report of the Committee and the pending evidence of the Leader of the House.

It might be helpful to set out the procedure as it stands, which has received recognition and support for quite some time. Under Standing Order No. 54, three days are set aside per year for the consideration of estimates or requests from Select Committees. I have read some of the evidence that has been given and other submissions. Suggestions have been made that not all Members have chosen to take an interest in this matter historically and that something should be done to increase that interest.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am grateful to the Deputy Leader of the House for giving me the opportunity to congratulate him on his new position. I look forward to us doing business together in the next few months. The situation is worse than he says. The one thing we cannot, under existing circumstances, discuss on estimates days is the estimates themselves. I made a valiant attempt to do such a thing the last time we had the opportunity. I was ruled out of order within 45 seconds—probably correctly. It is not that there is a problem with the estimates; it is that we cannot even discuss them under the current process.

Michael Ellis: The point the hon. Gentleman makes is being addressed by the Procedure Committee. Where, under Standing Order No. 54, the Liaison Committee involves the Select Committees, that in itself is a way in which to engage Members. Members who take part in those Select Committees then involve themselves during the course of every annual Session in the day-to-day business of those Committees, and the Chairperson of those Committees will make representations through
the Liaison Committee. That is a way in which the House and its Members can be involved in the Supply and estimates procedure.

Those three days are quite crucial. I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s point that it has been said that three days is insufficient, but that is being examined in detail by the Procedure Committee in its inquiry. The Liaison Committee decides which estimates are to be debated on estimates days. As I alluded to previously, considering requests from Select Committees is part of the democratic process of involving individual Members.

Pete Wishart: I am on the Liaison Committee; I know how this works. What happens in the Liaison Committee is that the Select Committee Chairs who put their hands up the quickest manage to get a Select Committee report debated. It has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the estimates and Supply procedure of the House—please do not confuse the two. It is a great opportunity for Select Committees to discuss their reports, but it has nothing to do with estimates and Supply discussion in this House.

Michael Ellis: I know the hon. Gentleman would not wish to reduce the value and impact of Select Committees and the work they do—the Chairmen and Chairwomen of those Committees would resist that strongly—but I recognise the point he makes. However, there are processes—recognised ones that have worked for some considerable time and have been examined hitherto—that frankly have allowed Members, through the Chairs of those individual Committees, to make representations to the Liaison Committee. That is our current process. I recognise that he finds it unsatisfactory, which is why it will be particularly useful to examine in full the recommendations of the Procedure Committee, on which his hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), sits. One can see why some consider Select Committees to have a role to play. Select Committees are very important in the process.

It is important to note that motions for Supply come in two forms: we have the debatable and amendable ones, and we have the ones that are rolled up. I think most people would recognise that, because of the sheer complexity and volume of some estimates and because they are so involved, we have to have a process whereby they cannot be considered on estimates days and whereby we restrict the amount of discussion. Otherwise, because of the quantities of money involved, we could almost discuss them for an entire fiscal year.

Patrick Grady: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. Does he accept that that level of complexity bears out our argument that the estimates process is irrelevant and does not provide us with an opportunity to discuss the Barnett consequentials? We were told by his honourable predecessors during discussion of the EVEL process that the estimates process was how Scottish Members could debate and vote on the Barnett consequentials of legislation that are now subject to the EVEL procedure.

Michael Ellis: I do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s contention. Of course it is possible to do exactly as the previous Leader of the House suggested. I followed and read about the processes that apply to, for example, the Scottish Parliament and other legislatures that have been cited, but one must bear in mind that the fiscal quantum and complexity involved are sometimes considerably less. As somebody pointed out in the written evidence to the Procedure Committee that I have seen, the Scottish Parliament was established with a clean sheet, but we do not start with that. This system has evolved over time and is necessarily somewhat more complex.

That is why we have the House of Commons Scrutiny Unit, which provides a range of briefings for Select Committees and helps to explain the main areas of interest. It may be that the Scrutiny Unit should be brought more to the attention of hon. Members, but it is there and it provides a good range of briefings for those Select Committees, helping to explain the main areas of interest.

The Clerk of Supply is also available to provide advice on procedure and the drafting of amendments to estimates motions. That is another mechanism whereby the process can be carefully assessed and analysed by individual Members, including those with a particular interest in Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish affairs.

It is open to any Member to request a debate, as the hon. Member for Rotherglenn and Hamilton West has done on this occasion, on certain aspects of particular estimates. That is another process and another area of scrutiny. A debate on the estimates process as a whole can also be accessed, as she has done today.

I recognise that a number of issues have already been raised in the Procedure Committee—the hon. Lady referred to them briefly in her earlier submissions. The timing, laying and approval of the main and supplementary estimates is something the Committee will want to look at. I have read that sometimes it is several months after the start of the financial year before those estimates are ready, and I know the Committee is looking at that.

The hon. Lady referred to the presentation of documentation, which is another issue that has been raised with the Procedure Committee. Presentation is important because it makes documentation more readable and accessible to a larger number of people. If it is possible to increase the use of graphs or other mechanisms by which presentation can become more accessible, clearly that should be looked at.

The hon. Lady mentioned the role of departmental Select Committees in the scrutiny of estimates and that is also being considered. She also referred to a possible role for the Backbench Business Committee in determining the estimates to be debated on estimates days. That is clearly of interest and can be assessed in the detailed Procedure Committee report.

As is clear from my points so far, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will consider a range of issues. They will, of course, relate to the estimates procedure and to the points made by the hon. Lady. He will be able to answer questions on the matter when he appears before the rather robust questioning of the Procedure Committee, some members of which I know—I am sure he will do so when he has considered the matter in the intervening weeks and months.

When the Procedure Committee has completed its evidence taking and produced its report, the Government will take time to carefully consider the recommendations. The hon. Lady asked for that assurance and I can give
it. This is an important matter that involves large sums of money. It is of interest to the House, and the Government will of course, as we always do, consider carefully any recommendations contained within it. I cannot give any undertakings about the assessment that Her Majesty’s Government will come to after considering the recommendations, but I can say, I think without fear of contradiction, that those recommendations will be carefully considered. I do not wish to pre-empt the outcome of that report or the pending evidence of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House and no doubt the thinking of the Procedure Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.

Citizens Convention on Democracy

2.30 pm

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government policy on a Citizen’s Convention on democracy.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and it is equally a great pleasure to welcome the new Minister to the Dispatch Box, such as it is, on his first outing as a Minister. I wish him well with this brief. I do not want to put any pressure on him, but there cannot be a more important brief. That was true even before the events of the last few weeks and certainly is subsequently. All his experience and his large knowledge of history may well be required as he fulfils his duties. I am sure that I speak for colleagues on both sides of the Chamber when I wish him well.

We have had an incredible few weeks. I do not want to concentrate on that, but it would be wrong of us not to recognise it and talk about it briefly. It seems to me that we have had about 14 years’ worth of politics in about 14 days, and it has been a very rich diet indeed, but it underlines the fact that we are now in a quite desperate situation in terms of needing to reconnect with the electorate and members of the public. One of the best ways we can do that—in fact, the most essential way we can do it—is by ensuring that people feel that they own their own democracy. At the moment, even after the last few weeks, people feel distant and alienated from their democracy. We need to take some steps towards ensuring that that does not continue.

Even before Brexit, elections and Chilcot—you name it; just about everything has been thrown at the political process in the last couple of weeks—there were some very severe underlying problems, including the low turnout at traditional elections, the obvious poor levels of registration on our electoral registers, instability in the Union, which is welcomed to some degree by some and to a lesser degree by others, the begging bowl system that we have for local government, certainly in England and Wales, and a less trusted political class, not least because of the tainted nature of party political funding.

All that has led us to a situation in which our very democracy is under threat. That sense of instability and inconsistency is something that all of us across the House, in all parties, need to address. I hope that if there is a thread running through my political career, it is that I have attempted to go across the parties, because I do not believe that anything is sustainable unless we can win everybody to a particular cause. A view that is about winning a cause in the short term and having it changed at the next election has never been a long-term view and certainly not a view that I have ever held. I am therefore delighted to see colleagues from across the House here today and I encourage them to participate during this hour and a half. I know that some colleagues are here to do winding-up speeches, but I also say to them that I would be happy to take interventions if they feel inclined to intervene on me as I progress.

I am perhaps painting quite a bleak picture, and I will come back to the exit from the European Union, but there is a tremendous flash of hope that we can all latch
on to. Possibly—in my wildest dreams—within a matter of weeks or months, we could be in the position of setting up a citizens convention on the UK’s democracy. It could be sitting or meeting certainly before Christmas if we all felt inclined to make that happen. On top of that, there is a growing view among the leaderships of political parties represented in this place that they ought collectively to act, do something, and start to develop a way forward. There is pessimism on the one hand, but optimism on the other that with a citizens convention enabling the people to participate, we could find ways forward on the problems that trouble us most in relation to our democracy.

I must add a word about the European Union. The recent European referendum has raised more questions than it has answered—it is arguable that it did not even answer the question that was on the ballot paper, but I will not go there. For example, what should be the role of our Parliament? That has been raised again as a result of having a referendum rather than relying on our tried-and-tested representative democracy. What about the role of the supposedly sovereign institutions within our system in guiding the UK forwards? What is the future for Scotland and Northern Ireland, both of which voted to remain? How can we use our democracy to repair the sharp divisions between people who voted one way and those who voted the other—there was almost a straight split—and the differences between different territories, age groups and social groups that were revealed by the referendum?

When I last raised this issue, I said it would be quite important that Government stayed out of anything to do with a citizens convention, but I have thought again about that and I have an open mind on it. I am talking about whether the situation now is so important, so critical, that Government might want to reconsider the case for funding in some way, shape or form—not 100%, but just making a contribution and giving this some status, official or otherwise. I am still mulling over that conundrum and will not come down on one side or the other on it, but certainly my mind has been altered a little by the severity of the crisis that now faces our democracy.

Parliament and Government alone will not be able to resolve the problems that are in front of us. That will require the British people as a whole to listen, learn, participate and come up with their answers, rather than expecting them to pop out of the bubble in Westminster and Whitehall. That is why it is very important that we do not just have another learned report, academic report, or report by the great and the good that is dislocated from the political process. It is absolutely central to the argument for a citizens convention that it locks in the political class to the point of view that there should be a broad-based and all-party effort in getting this to happen in the creation of a citizens convention including leaders of parties, that something serious should now happen in the creation of a citizens convention and that such a convention should link into activity on the Floor of the House in 2020.

That letter was signed by the leader of the Liberal Democrat parliamentary party, the leader of the parliamentary Green party, the parliamentary leader of the UK Independence party and the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconfield (Mr Grieve), a senior Back Bencher, whom we all know and respect, and a similar letter was sent by the leader of the parliamentary Labour party. That underlines to me that there is a broad view among senior colleagues within the House, including leaders of parties, that something serious should now happen in the creation of a citizens convention and that such a convention should link into activity on the Floor of the House in 2020.

I quickly add that that is not closed book; it is not a closed list. It has not been possible to get everybody on board with these decisions, or even physically to get round to everybody. I hope colleagues present today will realise that that door is still open and that their participation would be extremely welcome in what should be a broad-based and all-party effort in getting this show on the road.

How we do this is going to be really important. It is essential that we find the means, which modern technology now allows us, to allow absolutely any member of the public—any elector—to participate in this process and
have their say. With three and a half years still to go before the next general election, there is more than enough time to hone the process, so that everybody can participate. There is the more conventional part: the meetings, the national and regional rallies and venues, and the educational side of all that. Then there is the perhaps more exciting and novel side for many of us: how we use the internet to get to people, so that we can get something coherent and sensible that can be collated by literally millions of people, so that there is a clear input. This is not just one-way traffic. We need to devise a convention that listens and then responds, asks new questions and poses new options, so that people can engage in a process that they can trust and that they feel is listening to them and really genuinely wants to hear their views.

Whatever a citizens convention comes up with, one thing I can guarantee is that every Member will find something to object to in its conclusions—me, above all. That is going to come with the territory. We are all going to have to put up with a few things that we think, “My goodness, where did that come from?” or, “That is certainly something I could never support or would never have promoted.” Taking our ball away at that point is not an option. This is about a wholesale review of a democracy, which is currently not fit for purpose and needs to be made fit for purpose if we are indeed to continue to call ourselves a democracy.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op)

Mr Allen: I will give way to my hon. Friend, not least because of the tremendous track record that he established as the spokesperson for the Labour party in opposition on many of these issues.

Stephen Twigg: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on a very important issue and support what he said about how vital it is that this is cross-party. This is a huge area. Does he envisage that a convention might start with one aspect of democracy? I suggest that it could be looking at questions of devolution, which is proceeding apace in some parts of the United Kingdom but not in others and is where a citizen input is, surely, absolutely vital.

Mr Allen: The problem that I, all who have been involved in this process and, indeed, my hon. Friend have wrestled with is how much we need a political push to get this thing moving and how much we have to step back and just let the thing take its own course. Although I suspect that he might be reading the minds of people on a convention whom we have not yet selected and that devolution—in particular, currently, English devolution—might well be a key issue, we often come to the view that we cannot deal with one nation’s devolution without looking at integration with other nations and at how that fits together in a union structure, federal structure or whatever. I am content that we can have a proper process whereby the convention itself makes those decisions.

I mean that with the greatest respect to my hon. Friend. I anticipate that he, like every other Member, would feel a burden of duty to put extensive evidence and personal experience into a convention once it is under way. I am not dodging the question, but merely saying that I suspect a convention must be the body to make those decisions, even though I may well agree with my hon. Friend’s motive and direction.

It is important that we do that because people have to hold us all to our promises when we get to 2020. It is important, if they have participated and feel that, warts and all, the product of the convention by and large represents them or is fair—if not representing their actual views in its entirety—that they have faith in that process. They will then feel that they can discipline the Members of Parliament who take this forward after 2020. They will have a stake. They will be able to say, “That’s not what we agreed,” even if the Government in power in 2020 have not signed up to participate in the convention. I hope that would not be the case for any party when we get to that point, but it is important to get even that Government to respect the decision-making process that has been gone through and to take it seriously. That may well be the case going back to the Scottish referendum and the Bill that came before the House. To his credit, the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr Cameron) did put a Bill before the House. There was obviously a great pressure that he should do that. I hope that we would all have done that anyway, but there was clearly a great public pressure to ensure that was done, so that is very important.

This should be not just an atomised group of the electorate at large collating their views, but lots of independent organisations and political parties. That is where political parties can come into the process, not as directors and governors, but as contributors. Every party represented in the House and many beyond could make their own contributions, collectively or by encouraging their members to interact with websites and so on.

In addition, there are dozens of organisations, thankfully, in the web of civic society who support our individual and political rights. They could design their own innovative means of participation to feed into the greater convention. For example, citizens assemblies, which we have seen springing up not least because of the efforts of Professor Matthew Flinders and his team at the University of Sheffield, have already produced a lot of information, interaction and development. Professor Flinders sent me a quote from Tracey Cheetham, who is a member of the citizens assembly north in Sheffield. After one assembly, she said:

“One thing was absolutely clear—and forgive me for stating the obvious—greater democratic engagement is vital to make devolution work effectively… We had a room full of people who were anything but disengaged or apathetic. Frustrated, curious and some angry about politics in general, but all determined to have a say.”

What a mobilisation of people’s political firepower to feed into our political system, and that is just one example of what we could do.

There are also the Political Studies Association, the Hansard Society and the Local Government Association. I was fortunate enough to be involved in the report of the inquiry into better devolution by the LGA. The report was very influential and I am delighted to have participated in it. There are lots of others who should be involved, including every councillor, every branch of every political party, Bite the Ballot, which has done such fantastic work, and the Constitution Reform Group. There is a lot of potential to revive and revitalise
[Mr Graham Allen]

political discourse, if we take three and a half years to do it—and to do it seriously and have an outcome in 2020.

As well as that process, or concept, there is also the issue of how we move this forward. The first question is about funding. Those who have been engaged in the process to date are in the very early stages of discussing with external charities the possibilities for funding. I am sure that, collectively, we could make a sufficient appeal to ensure that we have this initiative properly funded, because that is vital. It would be appalling if it were to fall because of a lack of basic finance. I throw in my earlier point that I am now open in a way that I was certainly not before to see whether the Government—whether or not they will engage in the process, and I hope that they will be—if they would assist to make the process work. That might mean a matching contribution to individual donations. As we go down this path, I am sure that we can work out something sensible for us all.

We need to get the show on the road, and it is very important that we establish an impartial and respected team that is ready to move on request. My hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) will know that team well from his distinguished service on the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee; the team helped us, over five years, to create a written constitution—in fact, three options for a written constitution—and a Bill that would give it life. That was not a two-page Bill, but one that had gone completely through the mill of legal advice and parliamentary process.

Those colleagues, from King’s College London, are led by Professor Robert Blackburn, and they include Professor Vernon Bogdanor, who is known to many hon. Members, and Dr Andrew Blick, who has a track record of achievement in this field. King’s is ready to go when we are ready to go. I very much hope that we do not keep it on stand-by for too long because we want to make sure that the necessary Sherpa work, to use a crude phrase—that academic heavy lifting, the production of papers and the organisation of conferences, venues, and so on—can get under way.

That would be the organisational side, but the hard politics comes into the agenda that is set, as was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby. I imagine that would include reviewing the powers and membership of the second Chamber; examining the voting systems at parliamentary, devolved and local levels to encourage greater participation in public life, and Executive power—the way in which Government are often very difficult to hold to account and their powers hard to discover without judicial archaeology—reviewing the position of local government in relation to the centre; questions of devolution in England; examining the legal recognition of constitutional provisions such as individual rights; looking at the way in which parties and our other democratic institutions are funded; and, above all, the catch-all of any other relevant democratic issues that might be recommended by the convention as its work progresses. Those terms of reference are deliberately vague because the citizens convention should decide what the issues are. Whether we approve of them is not the issue; this is about whether the convention is entitled to look at whatever it wants and report, ultimately, to the House of Commons in 2020, after the next general election.

People have asked, “So what does the convention look like?” Actually, I think what the convention looks like is less important than what it does, how it reaches out and how people can get involved in it. As a working rule of thumb, it could be 100 people, selected properly, on a fair basis. There are lots of ways to do that. For example, Ipsos MORI, which is well connected to King’s College, has a way of selecting that number of people so that everyone is represented—from their nation, region, gender, socio-economic group and so on. I add that there should be, either as members or ex officio members, a sprinkling of the great and the good and of representatives from political parties, just to give it the necessary spice to ensure that when there are obviously impractical things, someone can stand up and say, “Actually, the best way to do that, given where we are at the moment, is to do it in the following way.” They would not rule or run the convention, but their expertise could be deployed, so that obvious mistakes were avoided.

There would be a role for other people. Again, that is not for us here to decide; it is for the convention to make those decisions. Will it make mistakes? Of course it will. But are we going to support it and ensure that it is impartial and independent? I think that is a greater principle than trying to eliminate all possible errors that may take place.

To turn to another structural thing, a chairs’ panel should be involved. A lot of work will need to be done and it is very important that people are represented on that panel from the nations of the United Kingdom and that there is a proper gender balance and proper representation from all parts of what we term British society—whether that is faith and non-faith, business, or whatever—to ensure that everybody has the possibility of seeing someone who is like them on a panel of chairs that pulls together this incredibly long and important exercise in our democracy.

Stephen Twigg: The process issues to which my hon. Friend has now turned are incredibly important. Earlier, he referred to the Scottish Constitutional Convention before 1997 and the more recent Irish experience. Does he agree that it is important to look at those and other examples of citizens assemblies being used in such processes, so that we can see what works and learn lessons from things that, perhaps, did not work in other countries?

Mr Allen: My hon. Friend is, as always, one step ahead of me. I was just about to say that we are not doing something wholly originally and it should not frighten us. People might say, “It has never been done before.” My goodness, if we need them, there are precedents—my hon. Friend outlined a couple—and there is a fantastic wealth of experience from Scotland’s Constitutional Convention and the process of the Scottish referendum.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby also mentioned the experience of Ireland—I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle has got the T-shirt. There are examples from Ontario, Iceland and, recently, British Columbia, among others. We are
not short of confidence in trusting people and finding good outcomes as a result of involving people in such processes. That is why the team led by King involves people from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the English regions. They are working together, pulling together all the background information, enabling people to see what was tried in the past and what was dismissed for whatever reason, and trucking through a long, important process to get the success we need. They have that ability and brainpower—at the request of a citizens convention—to be able to draft Bills to meet each of the key subjects that are decided upon and that should be put before the House of Commons in 2020.

That leaves aside a lot of questions, such as “Goodness me, can we do this in every school? Can we do this in every university and college?” Can we get every young person, in particular, excited by the fact that they can tell their grandchildren that they were participants in building the democracy of the United Kingdom—not just 40 white guys in Philadelphia, as they say about the American constitution, but literally millions of founding fathers and mothers building a new British democracy that will stand the test of time as the old one starts to look ever more shaky?

Where I would take this next is 2020, when we have a set of proposals, decisions and Bills, and the process comes back to the House of Commons. Have we agreed to every dot and comma that comes out of the convention? No, we have not. Every political party of whatever size that comes to the House of Commons in 2020 would have to make a decision not just to support or reject the proposals in their entirety, but to do a really serious job on behalf of the public: amending, line by line, and ensuring that the proposals were fit for purpose. That will be an onerous task for us all in the House at that point, but it will be well worth doing—a task that should not be cast aside readily on the basis of pure party politics or selfishness for the benefit of a political party. It should be done not by droogooing people through the Lobby, for or against, as just a ritual on a three-line Whip, but by really taking it seriously, as those who have founded new democracies have done—in the east of Europe, for example.

The process should be taken seriously right down to the minutiae of what shape the Chamber should be, let alone the question of the separation of Executive powers and legislative powers. From the massive and conceptual, to the minute, it should engage people. Here, we will need to take the process as seriously as we will expect people outside to have taken their role in it. It is an essential part of what we need to do to preserve our democracy in times when it is looking fragile, when the political atmosphere and interaction with the media mean that politics is more and more in danger of just becoming a branch of the entertainment industry, and when our serious role in devising a democracy that can last a long time becomes the most onerous duty that can fall to Members of Parliament.

I appeal to anybody who is interested in our democracy to play their part. That may be purely by writing in about their views on a particular thing. How does the Union hang together, or should it divide? How does a federal system work, or is that not appropriate? What will our future relationship be with our friends in Europe and across the globe? We can all participate in those issues.

From the smallest child understanding the basics of a civil society with their actions and work at school, up to Prime Ministers who can decide where our country goes, across to people who may have some funds that they think can be well spent on ensuring that the process is well staffed, well financed and well supported, and to those who, in 2020, will be in the Chamber of the House of Commons making the decisions, there is a role for everybody in the creation of a citizens convention for the United Kingdom because they will be taking on a role to create a lasting and stable democracy.
for an opportunity for Members to review the relative responsibilities and relationships of those different institutions. As technology changes, the nature and scope of how government might address something will change and evolve as well—we see that in energy and in the movements in broadcasting and digital technology.

The footprint of responsibility between devolved and non-devolved and between local government and others could well change, so we need to build in room for responsiveness to circumstance and change, and responsiveness to review. It should not be beyond us or beyond the political process to do that, but if it is, it is not beyond citizens, because they want to know, in a 21st-century democracy, who they are electing to do what job and who they can hold to account for delivery or failure. At the minute, they do not get that from the political process. It is almost a Tower of Babel—I say that as one of the people who negotiated and wrote parts of the Good Friday agreement.

As for the current situation, we have only to look at the previous election in Northern Ireland. Many of the parties in the course of the election debate sought devolved power and used their relative powerlessness as an excuse. They were saying, “We can’t deliver on some of these things. Westminster did not give us the money for this. There is an austerity agenda and other legislation has gone through.” The people are then at sixes and sevens because people in the political process are confused and confusing about who has what power.

The welfare reform issue is a classic example. On paper, the Northern Ireland Assembly has legislative power over welfare, but we have ended up with a motion in the Assembly, courtesy of Sinn Féin, the DUP and the Government, to hand that power back to Westminster for a year, to give Westminster direct rule powers to impose something that the Assembly itself would not do. Of course, when the Assembly gets those powers back, there is essentially going to be a power of karaoke legislation. Basically, all the Assembly gets to do is to pass the legislation according to the words and music that have been set in the legislation here at Westminster. That is not edifying for the integrity of a devolved institution and it is not credible or persuasive to the public. It would seem to be a cynical exercise in taking power and being unable to exercise it, handing it to somebody else, and then blaming and criticising them for the decisions they take. In those circumstances, it is important that people know exactly what responsibility Chambers have and how parties and others operating within those institutions are expected to operate.

I have heard such talk in a lot of the exchanges on the Scotland Act. There is confusion even yet as to the exact import of the future welfare powers that Scotland will have. The Act makes sweeping presumptions about the agreement that there will be between Scottish Ministers and a Secretary of State, but makes no provision for what happens when there is no agreement between them and when there are difficulties. We need to fix that—otherwise we will have political crisis.

We were told that Northern Ireland had a political crisis partly to do with welfare reform. The UK Government decided that, if the Assembly was not going to automatically pass the karaoke legislation for welfare reform, they would take the budget hostage—they were going to impose a penalty on the devolved budget. That penalty power was not in the Northern Ireland Act 1998—it was dreamed up by the former Chancellor and others and imposed. Someone might try to do that in Scotland. If Scotland fails to reach agreement.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Can we focus a little more narrowly on the topic of debate, rather than going down cul-de-sacs?

Mark Durkan: I am sorry, Mrs Main. I do not regard this as a cul-de-sac. I am setting out an example of the issues that a constitutional convention could address. We have already been served notice of difficulties, contradictions, confusions and gaps in the constitutional understanding that the current political class is serving up to people. If we have been given those warnings, we should recognise that there might be more difficulties in future, not least in an environment where we have been told that the Brexit result means an agenda of taking control. Let us show what control we are actually giving to citizens. Citizens need to be able to know what control they have as electors and as voters. The first way is to show them the relevance and direct power of their vote in electing the different bodies and the different classes of people that they are allowed to elect. The first thing the citizens convention should do is produce that new democratic charter that essentially gives the citizen an owner’s manual to know where they have power in relation to different Chambers.

Given the experience in Ireland, it is right that parties should be involved in the constitutional convention. In Ireland, as well as citizens being involved, parties were involved north and south. Unfortunately, permission for the northern parties to appoint parliamentarians did not extend to Members of this House—it extended only to members of the Assembly, so I was not able to serve as a member of the convention, but a very good friend of mine, Tom Arnold, successfully chaired that convention. It showed that whenever you have the parties there, the citizens doing the work know that it is not a case of producing something worthy that politicians can then ignore and parties can then drop because it is too hot or too avant-garde. The fact that the parties are involved in those reflective discussions is helpful in giving people confidence that there is some purpose to it. It certainly encourages people to give evidence and submit ideas to the convention—it is not a case of a lot of good ideas going nowhere. There are positive examples.

The convention can also be used to educate all of us about the nuances of the different constitutional understandings that there are in different parts of the UK. For instance, it would be helpful to let people know—a lot of people do not seem to appreciate this—that, in Ireland, the common membership of Ireland and the UK of the European Union was taken as a given when we negotiated the Good Friday agreement. It is written into the fabric of the agreement at various points, as is the European convention on human rights, but some people think we can dispose of both of those without doing any damage, as though it is a stud wall that can be knocked through when it is actually a supporting wall of our political dispensation and peace process.

Similarly, EU law and the European convention on human rights, as far as I know, are a part of the basis of the current constitutional dispensation for Scotland,
but, again, potential damage is being done to it. One thing a citizens convention could do is allow people from different parts of the UK to understand the sensibilities and nuances in those key issues, and that they are not simply disposable commodities that can be thrown away without doing damage to the democratic fabric.

There are all sorts of odd questions about second Chambers, which I will not go into. I will simply say that, under the recent constitutional development of English votes for English laws in the UK, it is interesting that the stricture on people from Northern Ireland, Scotland and sometimes Wales voting applies only to elected Members—it does not apply to non-elected members in the Second Chamber, which is absolutely preposterous. Those are the sorts of things that people in a citizens convention might want to usefully look at as well. We have a bizarre situation: English votes for English laws means some of us being told, “You may still be charged, but your vote will not count.” Some measures on which we are excluded from voting will have policy implications for us and our devolved institutions. Again, a citizens convention could be a useful way of ensuring we all have a better understanding of the issues, which is not properly reflected either in this House or in politics at large at the moment.

3.19 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): On behalf of the Scottish National Party, I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) on securing today’s debate. In the broadest possible terms, we support the thrust of what he says and the direction in which he is trying to travel. I agree there is a lot that needs to be fixed in our political system. I believe, in fact, that on 23 June the vote in many parts of the country—particularly in many parts of England outwith the metropolitan areas—was a cry of alienation from people who felt that the political system did not represent them and had left them behind. Had our politics been in better shape, we might well have got a different result on 23 June.

I want to put the Scottish perspective when it comes to constitutional reform and how the country should be governed. It is of course no surprise that my party favours a situation in which the people of Scotland become a self-governing nation in control of their own affairs. I know that fills the hearts of many of my colleagues with horror, but I hope to persuade them that it is not such an unreasonable proposition. I also hope to persuade them that, as well as being good for the people of Scotland, in that it would put them in direct control of their country and resources, it would make for better governance for these islands as a whole. I believe that the United Kingdom, a structure designed in the 19th century, is not really fit for purpose, in terms of the modern government we require in these islands.

Many people have talked about Scottish independence as a campaign for separation. We were accused of being separatists many times in the 2014 referendum campaign. Nothing could be further from the truth. Quite the contrary: we see independence for Scotland as a way of allowing it to play a greater role in Britain, Europe and the world. I feel that what in many ways keeps my country’s potential separate is the constitutional arrangements, which insist that our communication as a country with the rest of the world must happen through the prism of the United Kingdom. However, we do not have Scottish independence. We voted in 2014 to stay as part of the United Kingdom, and while we are here we want to work with others to improve the situation in the UK as a whole. That is why we were in and want to engage in a discussion of constitutional reform throughout the United Kingdom.

There are some glaring problems with our current constitutional arrangements, which are already the subject of separate campaigns. I will give just three examples, the first of which is the anachronism of the House of Lords—now, I believe, one of the largest legislative Chambers anywhere in the world. It is bigger, indeed, than the European Parliament. Yet not a single Member of that Chamber is elected by the people. That seems to me not to be a very 21st-century concept.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Can I ask the hon. Gentleman to bring his remarks back to the Government’s policy on a citizens convention on democracy, rather than some of the topics that might be considered by such a convention if it were brought forward? He has not mentioned the concept of the convention for quite some time.

Tommy Sheppard: I am coming to it. I have 10 minutes—is that right? It is not a crowded debate. I promise you I shall come to that matter very shortly, Mrs Main, but I did want to give what I regard as examples of what a convention might look at.

Mr Graham Allen: On the question of the second Chamber and its relationship to the convention, I should have thought one of the obvious points would be that if there is to be a second Chamber, a chunk of its membership, if not all of it, should be decided by the various nations that make up the Union, and that there should be at least some proportionality about it.

Tommy Sheppard: The principle for us is that it should be elected. We would be prepared to look at many different options and that could be one of them.

The second constitutional crisis that we face, which has already been touched on, is the electoral system itself. We are meant to be a democracy, yet the people in a position to make laws over the governed are not representative of the feelings of the people who took part in the election. It is not right that there should be a majority Government with a 37% mandate. If that were changed, and if people felt that their vote was a better determinant of the balance of power in the House of Commons Chamber or any future Chamber, I believe they would be more inspired and would have more belief in the democratic system. I speak as a representative of a party that, more than any other, has benefited from first past the post, winning 56 out of 59 seats on just 50% of the vote. I would happily give up my seat if we could change the electoral system.

The third issue is the concept of regional government. As an Edinburgh MP looking south of the border, I am sympathetic about the problems that exist, particularly in government in England. I feel that, whereas we have made moves towards devolution in the nations and regions, adequate regional structures have not been developed in the great areas of England to give people a sense of belonging.
To come to the matter of the convention, I suppose I have some concern—perhaps the hon. Member for Nottingham North will address this in his summing up—that the initiative for a convention must try to bring together the campaigns on particular aspects of the constitution that are already motoring and have some momentum, rather than acting as a brake on them. I would not want a situation in which everything had to be completely right, with a wonderful new written constitution, before any change could happen. We would be waiting here for centuries with no reform at all.

We have a slight paradox. There has been a lot of devotion to Scotland, and I believe we are on the road to further devolution and eventual independence. In the Edinburgh agreement of 2012, this Parliament agreed on the right of the Scottish people to determine whatever form of government they wanted. That right—the concept of the Edinburgh agreement—would need to be built into the deliberations and framework of any new convention looking at the constitution. In other words, it would need to be a ring fence around Scotland, saying, “That is to be determined by the people who live there.” There could be any number of ways to integrate that with the wider UK debate.

I liked very much what the hon. Member for Nottingham North said about the need for the convention not to be seen as just a committee of the great and good, sitting in an ivory tower discussing things. We can see from the attendance today that it is difficult to get much excitement about such debates, but we need to try. Whatever initiative is taken at national level, it must be driven downwards to the most local level possible, to involve people in the debate. We need a national conversation about what type of 21st-century constitution we need. I hope that is the direction in which we shall travel.

I have two things to say about Scottish examples that have already been cited in the debate. First, the 1989 Scottish Constitutional Convention, on which I served in the mid-1990s, in a past life and a different guise, was a very particular body. It tried to create an alliance within civic society. It brought together representatives—it could be argued how representative they were: it involved organisations that attempted to be representative bodies of others. The churches, trade unions, voluntary organisations and political parties came together in an organisational alliance, which did not have room for any individuals, although people could say they wanted to come to a debate or seminar and get involved. The body itself was an alliance of organisations. I presume that is different from what is being thought about today.

There has also been discussion of the 2014 Scottish referendum, and we must cite that as an example of how our democracy can work brilliantly. We had a participation rate of 85% in that referendum, and the reason why passions and excitement ran so high was that, rather than being presented as a dry constitutional question, the issue was made real. It was translated into people’s lives. Once the question was asked—“Should Scotland be an independent country?”—that raised all sorts of other questions, such as “Well, yes, but what sort of country?” “Who would run it?” “How would this work?” and “How would that work?” Every single organisation in Scotland was discussing the question’s implications for what they do and for the people they involve and represent, which is why it mushroomed and became such an exciting festival of democracy during the 2012 to 2014 period.

I will now finish, but perhaps the hon. Member for Nottingham North can advise us on how all this might happen. We need to consider ways of inspiring people, of being imaginative and of firing up passion in this debate. We can do that by drawing a line between constitutional change and improving people’s lives.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) rose—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid that I will not be calling the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) to speak. She has missed an hour of a 90-minute debate, but if hon. Members let her, she can intervene.

Mr Graham Allen: On a point of order, Mrs Main. Do I still have the right to sum up?

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Yes. You have two minutes at the end, or longer if the Minister finishes a little early.

3.30 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. It is also a pleasure to respond to this important debate on behalf of the Opposition. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) on securing it. As he said, it is difficult to enthuse and inspire people by trying to develop a better place for democracy. I pay tribute to him for pursuing this topic with tenacity and for recognising how important it is that we build a new consensus on the relationship between the people and the state and within the nations themselves.

The breadth of cross-party support for the initiative—from Labour’s leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), to the Lib Dems, the Greens and some Conservatives—reveals the depth of concern about the crisis that we currently face in our democracy. Fundamental questions remain on the health of that democracy. Between the people and the state, between the four nations and between people within the nations themselves, the vote to leave the European Union served to emphasise the depth of the divide within our country. The anger at the status quo, which first tore into mainstream political debate in the run-up to the Scottish referendum, was glaringly obvious to many of us long before. The signs were there in the ever-declining turnout at general elections, in the trust in previously respected institutions being destroyed by the recession and, perhaps most damningly of all, in the sense among many people that Governments do not care much about what ordinary people think. That is the crisis.

I am from a mining community on the great northern coalfield in the north-east. When I walk around and talk to people I have known for many years—people I have known all my life—they tell me that they feel that politicians do not have a clue about how they live their lives and about what is happening to their communities. Of course, as in the brutal decade of the 1980s, something more is happening. There is a sense that ordinary people
in communities like mine in the north-east, like many across the UK, are simply being abandoned, with their views being a huge irrelevance to politicians.

Caroline Lucas: I apologise for being late to this debate. The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point about why something that might sound dry—a citizens convention—actually goes to the heart of people's identity and why it is an opportunity for them to get their voice heard in a debate that really matters to them. Does he agree that the convention has the potential to be a vibrant debate if we pitch it right?

Ian Lavery: I wholeheartedly agree that it is up to politicians, who have the job and the opportunity, to try to inspire people and give them the opportunity to have a say. People feel completely and utterly disfranchised. We have to rise to that huge challenge.

We are living in an age of insecurity and inequality. The further people seem to be from Westminster, the more likely they are to feel ignored. People in my constituency are trapped between Scotland and Tyneside—it certainly feels that way—which is why the radical redistribution of power that the citizens convention and other radical devolution agendas envisage is so vital to the health of our democracy. The evidence suggests that local communities want to feel more engaged in the decisions that affect their lives, and giving them that power will bring them into the democratic process. Again, it is up to us, as politicians, to ensure that that happens.

Under the new Prime Minister, following the exit of the previous Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), the already unambitious northern powerhouse looks likely to fall even further down the list of priorities in the north. Regions that have been chronically underfunded for decades were given a pitiful settlement by the Treasury and are expected to be grateful. The funding settlement does not even begin to offset the drastic spending cuts at local authority level. The Government are giving with one hand and taking away with the other. The North East Combined Authority, for instance, has £30 million a year to spend for each of the next 30 years. Considering that in the past five years alone there have been more than £1 billion of cuts to local authorities covering the area, with more to come in the next four years, I can see why the Government's devolution agenda is being met with complete scepticism up north.

It might be asked what that has to do with the convention. The reality is that people cannot connect with the reasons for their lives being changed—with the cuts to services, for example—and they want to change things. The only way they can change things is by becoming part of the democratic process, so the convention is joined up with funding, austerity and the many things that are currently happening in the UK. With so much of the national agenda being driven not from town halls but from Whitehall and this place, it is little surprise that people seem disfranchised. Previously, more than 90% of civil servants in the Departments responsible for the northern powerhouse worked in Whitehall. That was raised many, many times on the doorstep. We talk about the northern powerhouse, but it is now normally called the northern poorhouse, which is probably more accurate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North has written many articles on the idea of the citizens convention, and everyone thinks that, to change things for the better, it is up to us to engage with constituents on what they want. It is up to us to present alternatives such as a progressive devolution settlement to engage people in the democratic process. That is why, rather than relying on Westminster to put something in our begging bowl, it is vital that we see radical devolution of real power down to communities, which know best how to use it.

The real question is the question of power. To paraphrase my late friend Tony Benn, who has power and how and where they using it? A power imbalance in the country has led to rising inequality over three decades or more. It has led to communities first being attacked, then being ignored and then being completely neglected by Westminster, which means that, despite the economy adding £4.3 trillion of wealth in recent years, GDP per capita has all but flatlined, household savings are at their lowest level since 1963 and household debt is at its highest since just before the crash. In other words, the proceeds of growth are not being shared, which is fundamentally because power is not being shared. Power could be reintroduced through citizens' assemblies and constitutional conventions, which is why I say that power is the most important issue we are discussing today. Half the people of this country feel that the Government do not care much or at all about what people like them think—that is an unequal access to power and we see the consequences of it in the real economy. What communities who have lost faith in Westminster to deliver for them need above all else is real power to transform their lives. That real power, or at least part of it, comes from the citizens assemblies and the citizens constitutions.

If the northern revival is to take root, it must take us away from an economy dominated by the City of London and from a politics dominated by Westminster, in which London can simply click its fingers and get a £32 billion Crossrail 2 project delivered. That is fine, but in constituencies like mine at the other end of the spectrum, away from Westminster, we have rail tracks but not trains. We are even looking to fund passenger trains to run through Ashington or Bedlington, which we have not had for 50 years. Giving people the power—giving them democracy—allows different things to happen in the communities we are all proud to serve.

We need control over the areas where we have lagged behind, such as energy, internet services and transport. In constituencies up and down this country—in mine, for example, there are fewer business start-ups than in most other English regions and pay is some £200 per week behind London—we need the power to change our economy for the better. We need the power to respond to problems that are particularly profound in our own areas. That would be an advantage of citizens assemblies. We should have the funds to invest properly in skills and innovation and to link the fantastic work of the colleges and universities, but we should also be able to insist that, if we are all to have a stake in the future of this country and in the devolution agenda, we will do things differently: workers' rights will be properly respected and everyone must share in the growth of our areas, and no one should be left behind.

I therefore absolutely commend the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North to address that inequality of power through the constitutional
process and through an attempt to engage the millions of citizens who want a more direct stake in their own future and in the future of their communities, and who are never asked what they think except for every five years when a general election is looming.

That is partly about what the structures of the UK will look like, but it is about much more: the revival of our communities, the health of our democracy and the future of our nation. We are strongest when we work together. Discussions with people about their communities, as well as with experts, trade unions and other stakeholders, will bring people together and create a collective vision for the future that genuinely benefits the people, rather than just paying lip service to democracy.

In 2014, under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), the Labour party agreed totally with a citizens charter and committed itself in principle to having one. The Labour party position is reaffirmed here in the House today. I ask the Minister at least to confirm that the Government will give due consideration to a wider, more diverse and inclusive democratic process, initially by agreeing in principle to a citizens convention.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) on securing time for this debate, which comes at a very significant time for this country. Indeed, I am delighted to make my ministerial maiden speech in Westminster Hall; it is an honour to be here. I pay tribute to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), who did an excellent job in office and whose dedication to constitutional affairs was evident today in his speech on the ten-minute rule Bill proposed by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas).

The events of the past few weeks have provoked much discussion of the UK’s constitutional arrangements. I welcome that discussion and the wide-ranging contribution that hon. Members have made throughout this debate. The UK’s constitution is constantly evolving. It is right that there is debate and discussion as it evolves, and the hon. Member for Nottingham North has been at the forefront of ensuring that that happens. Only a few months ago, he introduced a private Member’s Bill for a constitutional convention. I thank him for this further opportunity to debate these vital issues and I put on record my gratitude to the hon. Members for Foyle (Mark Durkan), for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) and for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) for their contributions. I am only on my third day in the job, but I have listened intently to everything they have had to say.

I am coming to the realisation that constitutional debates tend to be fairly wide-ranging. Nevertheless, when we look at what has been said, almost all major parties think it extremely encouraging that we have that representation. We may not agree on everything, but one thing we can agree on is a greater level of democratic engagement. Indeed, one of my driving priorities as a new Minister will be to encourage that engagement wherever possible. I was heartened by what the hon. Member for Nottingham North said about cross-party working—indeed, these matters are too important not to work on a cross-party basis—and I have noted the contents of the letter he read out in his opening statement. However, while we can have cross-party agreement on engagement, the Government disagree on the means of delivering it. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have no plans to establish a convention on democracy. We believe that the evolving nature of the UK’s constitution means that it is ultimately unsuited to a convention.

The UK constitution is characterised by pragmatism and an ability to adapt to circumstances. That arrangement has delivered a stable democracy by progressively adapting to changing realities. I fear that a static convention that decided on constitutional matters once and for all would not fit with the tradition of evolving and adapting in line with people’s expectations and needs. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby mentioned other precedents of constitutional conventions in Ireland, Iceland and Ontario. However, those international examples highlight how countries that have gone down that route have found the entire process challenging. The hon. Member for Nottingham North mentioned that it is a lengthy process, but it is important that we learn from what has happened in other countries. The recommendations of the conventions in British Columbia and Ontario were rejected when they were put to the public in referendums. In Ireland, of the 18 recommendations made by the Irish constitutional convention, only two were put to a referendum and only one passed.

Mark Durkan: Yes, only two recommendations were put to a referendum and one passed, but more are to follow. The Government said that the country could not have a referendum on all the issues at once, but other referendums are to follow, including on extending the vote in presidential elections to the Irish diaspora.

Chris Skidmore: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. What he says is important and relates to the fact that the discussion of constitutional matters is a process in which we have to take the confidence of the people with us. I fear that if certain expectations are put down or if findings are not immediately delivered—the hon. Member for Nottingham North mentioned a convention’s findings being adapted wholesale—we will run into difficulties.

Let us look at other countries. In Iceland, where a more wide-ranging constitutional convention was undertaken, all six of the proposals were passed, but they were not taken forward by successive Governments. That is another issue with the binding nature of constitutional conventions that highlights one of our key concerns with such proposals: they often fail to deliver their intended result.

I want to put on record that the Government do not believe that exercises of engagement are a bad thing. They are laudable endeavours to engage the public in a discussion on the constitutional principles that underpin a country. In particular, I recognise the concerted and sustained effort of the hon. Member for Nottingham North to keep constitutional reform at the top of the agenda. He is a dedicated campaigner who is respected on both sides of the House and whose work on early intervention has ultimately resulted in a change in
Government policy. I wish him the best with what he is trying to do. As Chair of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, he oversaw numerous inquiries into constitutional issues, including constitutional conventions. As I said, any initiative designed to promote engagement is welcome. Having exhausted all avenues in Westminster, there is nothing to stop him personally reaching wider afield, beyond the walls of this austere building—any private endeavour that raises public participation is surely to be welcomed as a good thing. However, I must set out some concerns about the proposals as they stand.

One of the key problems with national constitutional conventions is that ultimately it is very difficult to engage those who are not already engaged. The people who should be participating are exactly those who do not respond to the invitations. As a Government, our focus must be on ensuring that everyone who is eligible to vote in polls is able to do so. We have already made great progress, but there is more to do. We are working with the Electoral Commission, civil society organisations and local authorities to reach communities who are not represented on the electoral register. Online registration has made it easier to register to vote, and we have seen record levels of registration in recent months. Data collected from the 382 local voting areas show that the provisional size of the UK and Gibraltar electorate now stands at a UK record 46.5 million.

The hon. Member for Nottingham North mentioned a “flash of hope”. With the record levels of engagement we are seeing post the referendum, that flash of hope is to continue that engagement. Amid all the constitutional discussions about the franchise, my overriding priority as a new Minister will be to reach out to the disfranchised who are already eligible to vote but who remain invisible from public participation. It is that challenge—one we have to take as seriously as an unacceptable inequality as a new Minister will be to reach out to the disfranchised who are already eligible to vote but who remain invisible from public participation. It is that challenge—one we have to take as seriously as an unacceptable inequality as we do educational underachievement or social deprivation—that I intend to make my focus.

Stephen Twigg: Does the Minister agree that for the efforts he just described to be successful, we need to restore citizenship education in schools?

Chris Skidmore: I remember very well, when I had first become a Member of Parliament, debating with the hon. Gentleman, when he was shadow Education Secretary, about his excellent record as an Education Secretary, about his excellent record as a new Minister will be to reach out to the disfranchised who are already eligible to vote but who remain invisible from public participation. It is that challenge—one we have to take as seriously as an unacceptable inequality as we do educational underachievement or social deprivation—that I intend to make my focus.

Mark Durkan: Before the Minister moves on from the point about the devolved territories, do the Government recognise that the settlement in Northern Ireland rests not on the concession of devolution from Westminster but on the express consent of people in Ireland, north and south, when they voted for the institutions of the Good Friday agreement, as reflected in the Irish constitution as well? At times, it seems like devolution is seen as just a gift from Westminster and people do not understand the integrity of the democratic institutions in Ireland.

Chris Skidmore: The establishment of the Good Friday agreement in the late 20th and early 21st centuries was one of the most important constitutional changes we have seen. We have to give credit to the previous Labour Administration, and the Conservative Administration before that, for coming up with that settlement.

Mark Durkan: The people of Ireland had something to do with it too!

Chris Skidmore: Of course. That settlement proves the importance of laying aside differences and of people, whether from different parties or different countries, being able to work together. We will not get such agreements unless we not only spend a lengthy period being able to decide them, but put aside often bitter differences. When it comes to the discussion of any constitutional reform, nothing will happen without cross-party agreement, as the hon. Member for Nottingham North said. The Good Friday agreement clearly highlights the need for such discussions to be cross-nation and cross-party.

We do not believe that all the important changes that have so far taken place in the devolved nations, which were designed to hand power back to people, should be delayed by the establishment of a convention. What matters about the constitution is that it works and is flexible enough to adapt to political challenges, not that it has been neatly drawn up and is theoretically pure.
Hence the Government are very much focused on making sure that the UK’s constitutional arrangements work for all our citizens, in a Union based on fairness, friendship and mutual respect.

In closing, I again welcome the intentions of the hon. Member for Nottingham North in making his proposal, which will help to inform and add to a rich debate on this issue. I wish him well, but I cannot undertake any commitment to Government involvement, financial or otherwise. As I have made clear, our immediate priority is on delivering the constitutional settlement we are committed to, but there will always be opportunity for debate and discussion in the House about the UK’s constitutional arrangements. I look forward to many more opportunities, I hope as Minister, to discuss and debate the constitutional matters that underpin this nation. Again, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate and thank him for allowing us to discuss these important matters.

3.56 pm

Mr Graham Allen: I hope to respond rather speedily, Mrs Main. The Minister is now surrounded by former members of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, who have entered the Chamber for the next debate, so he has to be careful. More seriously, I congratulate him on a very polished and confident performance in his maiden speech as Minister and wish him well in his job. We will be knocking on his door at various points throughout his tenure, not least on this issue, but also on the issues that were raised during the debate and to which he referred, such as electoral registration, about which many of the same people feel passionately. We will use his good offices to try to make progress on some of those issues.

No one is anticipating wholesale change in a big-bang effort. As the hon. Member for Foyle pointed out, it will be a process. It may be that one Bill is dealt with quickly and another Bill—let us draw breath—deals with another issue. Throughout the 2020 Parliament, if the public had participated in their millions in a constitutional exercise, they would expect nothing less of any Government, or any coalition or alliance in government, than progress on what they had been involved in over such a period.

On the more general point, the Minister and everyone else who spoke reflected the passionate desire to make this stuff happen. As the hon. Member for Edinburgh East pointed out most eloquently, that means getting some drive and excitement. The biggest drive and excitement that anyone can ever find in politics or in their daily life is when they control their own destiny and can do something about it, not least in connection with their community, locality, nation or whatever.

That takes us back to the idea of giving people the ability and the framework that my colleague on the Front Bench, my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), discussed so clearly. We need to provide the structure in which people can take control. We can call it subsidiarity or any other ugly word for a beautiful concept, but is about giving people at the lowest possible level the ability to run their own lives. Despite all the rhetoric, that is something shared by all parties in the House of Commons.

We can create the necessary passion and excitement, but to get to that great nirvana of self-realisation, we have a responsibility to do the nuts and bolts. The biggest set of nuts and bolts that we can do something about is to create a citizens convention so that people can take control of their own lives and build the sort of democracy of which everyone present would be proud.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved.*

That this House has considered Government policy on a Citizen’s Convention on democracy.
Flag Fen Bronze Age Park

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the development of the Flag Fen bronze age park in Peterborough.

I welcome you to the Chair, Mrs Moon, and it is an honour and privilege to serve under your chairmanship for the first time.

I also welcome the Minister back to her position after her maternity leave. It is great to see her reappointed to her post in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport under the new dispensation. In addition, I pay tribute to the excellent work by our colleague, the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr Evennett), who covered her duties during her absence, to his great credit.

I am here in Westminster Hall today to talk briefly about the potential development of the Flag Fen bronze age park in Peterborough. Flag Fen has the potential to be one of the finest cultural, historical and archaeological sites in the United Kingdom. In talking about Flag Fen, I will refer not only to the existing Flag Fen facility, which is located in my constituency about four miles east of the centre of the city of Peterborough, but to the Must Farm site, which is in the constituency of the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay), and adjacent to the town of Whittlesey.

Not many people will be aware of this, but the Fenland area to the east of Peterborough is one of the pre-eminent bronze age areas in the whole of Europe. The Minister may well know that in 1982 the noted archaeologist Francis Pryor, working with others, discovered the site at Flag Fen, which was a well-preserved wetland timber causeway. Since then, Flag Fen has been developed into a visitor centre with an additional bronze age archive, reconstruction and landscape recreation, with metal and other artefacts. Indeed, it is now a site for leisure and culture, and I can attest to the fact that it is a multi-use site because last summer I took my family to see a production of “The Three Musketeers” in the open air theatre at Flag Fen and we had a superb time. As the Minister will know, Flag Fen is managed by Vivacity, the arts, culture, sport and leisure trust, on behalf of Peterborough City Council.

Flag Fen itself is already considered to be a site of national importance archaeologically, and it is of course a scheduled monument. However, the site cannot be left in abeyance, because it is effectively drying out, which threatens its survival. Historic England is working with key stakeholders to see whether water levels on the site can be raised.

That is Flag Fen, but even more exciting is the site one mile to its east, Must Farm, which, as I have said, is adjacent to the town of Whittlesey. In 2011, nine bronze age log boats were discovered on the site and they are now preserved and displayed at Flag Fen. Further excavation of Must Farm has been undertaken by Cambridge Archaeological Unit, with funding from Historic England and Forterra Ltd, the company that operates the brick pit in which the site is located. That archaeological work has provided us with unique insights into the late bronze age, creating a picture of life on the site 3,000 years ago.

At Must Farm, there are five well-preserved roundhouses, as well as food deposits; if anyone is interested, let me say that people in that period largely ate red deer, pike and wild boar. Other discoveries include fabric, a cartwheel, jewellery and animal skeletons. The site was partly destroyed by fire, which has led it to being described by the media as “The Pompeii of the bronze age”, or sometimes as, “The Peterborough Pompeii”. Some people in Fenland take exception to that latter description, as the site is in Fenland and not in the city of Peterborough, but we will not dwell on that. The point is that the site was evacuated very quickly as a result of the fire and its occupants naturally left in a hurry, but in so doing they left a portrait in time of life in the bronze age.

Must Farm has been described by Historic England as being undoubtedly one of the most important prehistoric sites excavated in Britain for many years and the site’s academic value is undoubtedly very high. Historic England also says that many of the finds, including pottery, bronze artefacts and the largest glass collection from the bronze age ever found in the UK, are of a type never seen before or only partly seen, in fragmentary form.

Must Farm is a site of international importance and it attracts scholars from across the world. In time, it will revolutionise our understanding of life in the bronze age, both in the United Kingdom and in Europe. So it is right to pay tribute to the diligent, hard work of the fantastic team behind the excavation over the last few years, which has cost about £1.4 million and was essentially financed by Forterra Ltd and Historic England. I was privileged to have the opportunity in February this year to go with my neighbour, the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire, and the then acting Minister, the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford, to see for ourselves the fabulous work and the dedication shown by the team on the site.

However, the site cannot be kept in its present state on its present location; inevitably, it must be relocated. Historic England and Forterra Ltd believe that, to continue the conservation and analysis of the timber structures that have been found, a three-year programme and funding regime is necessary. The Minister will probably know that a study was completed in 2014 that examined the potential options for and development of what was then described as a “Museum of the Bronze Age” in Peterborough. At the time, the study assessed the bronze age archive and the potential business models, viability and site option appraisals for bringing forward the museum project.

More recently—indeed, on 27 May—key stakeholders met to take this project forward. They were Historic England, Vivacity, Cambridgeshire County Council, Peterborough City Council, Cambridge University, the local enterprise partnership, Cambridge Archaeological Unit and Arts Council England. It shows how important this project is that such a wide range of key stakeholders are invested in its future success. They updated the finds from 2014 to this year, reviewed the feasibility study and expanded the assessment, looking at the site’s tourism
and research potential, its development and business modelling options and its viability. Peterborough City Council was the key stakeholder and took the strategic lead on the project, with a firm belief that all those agencies should work collaboratively, because it was imperative to move forward on this important national and international project.

All parties agreed that the refreshed options appraisal should consider the most sustainable approach, including financial sustainability in respect of the future display of this hugely important fenland archaeological discovery. Flag Fen visitor centre will be central to the project, and an approach to the Heritage Lottery Fund will be the next step, with a view to bidding for between £2 million and £3 million to make it a reality. Incidentally, the Heritage Lottery Fund was not included in the key stakeholders' discussions, so that there was not a conflict of interest and the Heritage Lottery Fund could look with fresh eyes at the efficacy or otherwise of the stakeholders' proposal.

We hope that the project will emphasise providing the greatest possible benefit to the city of Peterborough's visitor economy, to Fenland District Council and to the utilisation of Peterborough's existing assets, which over the years include the refurbished and relaunched museum and, in pride of place, our wonderful medieval cathedral. The cathedral is more than halfway through its “Peterborough 900” appeal, which celebrates the 900-year anniversary of the establishment of a Saxon abbey on the site or nearby. That appeal is well on its way to financial sustainability in respect of the future display of this hugely important fenland archaeological discovery. Flag Fen visitor centre will be central to the project, and an approach to the Heritage Lottery Fund will be the next step, with a view to bidding for between £2 million and £3 million to make it a reality. Incidentally, the Heritage Lottery Fund was not included in the key stakeholders' discussions, so that there was not a conflict of interest and the Heritage Lottery Fund could look with fresh eyes at the efficacy or otherwise of the stakeholders' proposal.

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I am not saying that Flag Fen and Must Farm are the equivalent of Stonehenge or the Jorvik Viking Centre in York, but they have the potential to go in that direction and be a great asset. I am here to raise the profile of the project and, through this debate, to encourage serious scholars, students and casual visitors and tourists to go to the Peterborough area and see this fantastic project. I hope that the Heritage Lottery Fund is benign when it comes to archaeology.

The fen area is truly amazing. It is a rich source of archaeological finds. One fundamental aspect of archaeology is that new material is always refining and reworking existing knowledge. The fen area continues to contribute in no small way to our growing understanding of how our ancestors lived, as there is often no written record, but only physical remains to guide us, including landscapes, structures, sites, deposits and objects. Some of the remains lie hidden from sight, below ground or underwater, but others are prominent features of landscapes or seascapes, contributing to the richness of their character, including their folklore. Together, they help to enrich our quality of life, by contributing to our

As my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough said in his contribution, the fenland east of Peterborough is a unique environment in this country. Excavations have forged new techniques and approaches that have helped redefine and enhance our understanding of prehistory. Favourable preservation conditions offer us an exceptional and invaluable window into the past. Flag Fen archaeological park, with its bronze age reconstructed roundhouse and the incredibly preserved timbers of the prehistoric causeway, allows us to travel back 3,500 years to discover what life was like for our prehistoric ancestors. The preservation and quality of the artefacts that have emerged are significant enough to offer an incredible insight into prehistoric life. It is held up as one of the finest bronze age archaeological sites in northern Europe. I understand that 200-plus school groups and 10,000 visitors make the journey to the site every year, and I hope they leave with a greater understanding of this truly internationally important discovery.

I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Vivacity, working on behalf of Peterborough City Council, on its work in developing the hands-on learning offer for schools. Its use of the Flag Fen collections helps students increase their engagement with history and archaeology more than classroom study would alone. To build on that work, I am pleased to confirm that Historic England's heritage schools programme has recently commissioned a project to further engage local schools in the prehistory of the Fens. The programme creates quality teaching resources and a bespoke curriculum to help educate students about their local heritage.

The Flag Fen site was discovered by Francis Pryor in 1982, and I was pleased to read that he is also advising at the recent excavations at the nearby Must Farm archaeological site. His skills and expertise are invaluable to this area of research. Both Flag Fen and the extensive Must Farm settlement excavations, which ended last week, are archaeological projects that have been in the vanguard of prehistoric research. The projects are not simply one-off excavations that have caught the media's attention. As Flag Fen demonstrates, the sites have an important and continuing role in developing our understanding of the prehistoric landscape. I am pleased to report that Flag Fen's expert staff are continuing to preserve our history and important artefacts on behalf of the nation. The eight log boats that my hon. Friend mentioned, which were discovered at Must Farm, are now being preserved at the Flag Fen museum. My thanks go to Historic England for contributing towards the Flag Fen excavations and the ongoing feasibility studies that are looking into the long-term preservation of the Flag Fen site.

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sense of cultural identity and spirit of place. They provide wonderful opportunities for research, education, leisure and tourism, much of which falls into my much wider portfolio.

Such remains represent a finite and often fragile resource, which is subject to a broad range of human activities and natural processes. My officials have liaised with their counterparts in other Departments to ensure that effective and consistent policies on the conservation and enhancement of nationally important archaeological sites such as Flag Fen are fully integrated into national planning policy.

Flag Fen was declared a scheduled monument by the Secretary of State in 2012 under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979, giving it legal protection. As I mentioned, part of the site is open to the public as a visitor attraction. It has become really important to recognise that funding for archaeological sites is always needed. Owing to the site's nature and location, it is essential for Flag Fen to make the most of opportunities to provide the best facilities for its visitors and access for all and to continue its essential conservation work and research into its unique collection of finds.

I understand that Vivacity is in discussion with the Heritage Lottery Fund about an application for funding. I encourage those discussions to continue and will, of course, keep a close eye on progress. Although it is protected as a scheduled ancient monument, the site is on Historic England’s at-risk register as it is gradually drying out, which threatens its continued survival. Historic England is conducting research and is in discussions with local stakeholders to find out whether site water levels can be raised; that is work in progress. My Department is working closely with Historic England to continue supporting British archaeology in all forms, from the first finds of an excavation to the preservation and research of our nation’s treasures. Promoting the skills necessary for the understanding, protection and management of the historic environment is something that we take incredibly seriously.

I had the privilege of attending the British Archaeological Awards, where Must Farm was described as not just Peterborough’s but Britain’s Pompeii and won the award for best archaeological discovery. I congratulate again all who have worked on that important excavation. The award was voted on by an independent panel of archaeologists and reflects the breathtaking preservation of the layers of human occupation uncovered by archaeologists at the site, which was all once lost to rising sea levels, 3,000 years ago. Although somewhat separated both in space and time, Flag Fen and Must Farm are part of the same extensive and well-preserved fen landscape. Together, they have unparalleled potential to illuminate life in bronze age Britain. Through Historic England, we will continue to work with the Flag Fen visitor centre to help it to resolve the current issues that threaten the preservation of the site and to assist it in making the most of the opportunities that come forward.

Question put and agreed to.

4.20 pm

Sitting suspended.

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**Online Child Abuse**

4.38 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered prevention of online child abuse.

I am honoured to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, and to be in a room of parliamentarians who have campaigned for so long on this issue. I feel I am among friends, and I hope that together we can cover some real distance.

Tomorrow, the Office for National Statistics will release its police crime data for the past six months. It is the first time it is including online fraud and computer misuse. Fraud is a huge issue in this country—Age UK says that 53% of people over the age of 65 believe that they have been targeted by fraudsters—but the data coming out tomorrow will not include online abuse and harassment. Sexual offences are recorded, but not the age of the victim or the specific nature of the crime. I ask the Minister to look into that. For sexual offences, if we can differentiate between under 18s and over 18s, we would have a much better understanding of the scale of child abuse in this country.

Today I want to focus on online child abuse. Too often we think of child abuse as something that happens only to vulnerable children—many child protection services focus only on their definition of vulnerable children—but the truth is that the internet means that almost every child in the UK is at risk of abuse. Ministers have yet to show that they understand that. The Minister before us has an understanding of child abuse—I welcome her to her new role—and I hope she will be able to make a difference.

Let me set out the context. With respect to everyone in this Chamber, we are too old to understand the generational pressure that our youngsters are under because of social media. I was 26 when I got my first mobile phone, and I used it to text. I did not have the 24/7 immersion of the online world on my phone. We cannot understand the enormous psychological pressure that that puts on young children. They cannot get away from abuse; it follows them home. Bullying has always been here, but if I was bullied at school, when I got home and shut the door I would hopefully be safe from it. For children now, it goes on and on. We need to understand that as a country and as a Government. Seventy-eight per cent. of 12 to 15-year-olds own a mobile phone, 65% of which are smartphones, and a smartphone means access to the internet.

According to the 2015 Parent Zone survey, 67% of parents admitted to resorting to “iParenting”—that is, they are a bit busy, so they give their child the iPad as a babysitter. I understand that: children love being on the internet, and they love their iPads, but the iPad is a direct link to the outside world and its dangers. The problem is that parents often fail to appreciate the severity of the threat faced by their children, largely because they do not understand everything that their children are doing online. Half of young people at home report that their parents know only some of what they get up to on the internet, according to an Ipsos MORI poll commissioned by Barnardo’s.
People do not grasp how sneaky—for want of a better word, and keeping it polite—abusers and groomers of children are. I will give two examples, the first being gaming. A parent might buy the child an online game as a Christmas or birthday present. When the child is online playing, say, a shoot ‘em up game, a chat is going on, and that is open internationally. When I speak to girls, they tell me that they turn it off, because of the amount of sexual harassment they get; when I speak to boys, they tell me, “Oh no, it’s other boys my age who are talking to me about who we are going to shoot, and who we are going to kill.” Talking about the abuse on the screen is only a slight step from starting to groom or radicalise a child—we need to understand that.

My other example is something else that we need to understand. A police officer told me this. A family might be watching TV on a Sunday evening and the child is there, but with an iPad. The parents have no idea whom that child is talking to, or what is being said. Parents do all they can to protect their children, but they are literally letting someone into their home—someone they have no control over and have not vetted. To be honest, there are a lot of bad people out there who are deliberately using the internet to target our most vulnerable.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I commend the hon. Lady on securing this debate. I also welcome my hon. Friend the Minister to her place—a promotion long overdue. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that children can be open to the many different ways of harassment that she is describing. Does she, like me, want to see the producers of such platforms and products take far more responsibility for building out the problems from the design stage, rather than leaving it to parents to police what can be almost impenetrable problems?

Sarah Champion: The right hon. Lady makes a very key point. For film, the British Board of Film Classification will vet films and put criteria and age limits in place. That needs to be happening much more robustly with games. Gaming in particular has a nasty, misogynistic element. For example, one incredibly well known game gives extra points to someone sleeping with prostitutes who then abuses or gang-rapes them. The game might have age verification for 18, but what happens if someone is playing it with a younger brother who is eight? We need robust legislation, because we are taking those games into our homes and giving them to our children.

As I said, the mobile phone and the iPad enable children to be bullied 24/7. To give some stats to back that up, one in three children has been a victim of cyber-bullying, and almost one in four young people has come across racist or other hate messages online. According to the 2016 Childnet survey, 82% of 13 to 17-year-olds had seen or heard something hateful on the internet in the past year. By “hateful”, I mean something that has been targeted at people or communities because of their gender or transgender identity, sexual orientation, disability, race, ethnicity, nationality or religion.

To highlight the impact of bullying, I will focus on one aspect of it: the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. Recently, Stonewall released truly shocking figures: nine in 10 young people have heard homophobic remarks at school; six in 10 young people have experienced homophobic bullying; and one in four young gay people has reported experiencing homophobic abuse online. Then there are the consequences—I am going goosebumpy as I read this—which are that two in five of those young LGBT people contemplate suicide and 50% self-harm. Young LGBT people are three times more likely to commit suicide than their straight peers. That is what our young people have to deal with.

When I started to research online abuse, I had not considered the targeting of specific groups because of their sexuality or situation. We should think about it from the point of view of young people considering their sexuality. They will not talk to their mum or, probably, to their teacher. Where do they go to find information? They go online. Paedophiles and perpetrators deliberately target young LGBT people because they know that young LGBT people are vulnerable and isolated. They then meet and abuse them. Unfortunately, for some of our young people, that is a daily occurrence.

I also want to talk about young people and children with learning difficulties, and two things in particular. First, the overly sexualised behaviour of children with learning difficulties is often put down to their condition rather than being considered to be a cry for help, or a side-effect of being abused. We absolutely have to challenge that. One in four children is targeted with online hate because of their gender, sexual orientation, race, religion or transgender identity, but that horrifying figure goes up to 38% for someone who has learning difficulties. Those people are being deliberately targeted because of their condition. I urge the Minister to focus on those specific groups.

I will now talk about the internet world. I have been very honoured to work with a fantastic organisation called the Internet Watch Foundation, which I commend to the House. The foundation’s most recent report was in 2015. It found 68,092 pages of web images that it confirmed as child sexual abuse images. To break the stat down, that is 68,000 children who have been abused for the gratification of a paedophile, and 68,000 lives that have been decimated. We need to put support in place. That figure is 118% up on last year, an increase that terrifies what police forces and social services are telling us—such crime is growing exponentially. We have to do all that we can to prevent it.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for securing the debate, and I, too, welcome the Minister to her place. Something raised during consideration of the Policing and Crime Bill was the need for child sexual exploitation units, as well as specialist digital units, in police forces throughout the country. I am sure she shares my concern about the inconsistency of approach among police forces and, possibly, among the devolved nations.

Sarah Champion: I do. We should praise the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, which has done fantastic work, but I have spoken to officers on the street. Once CEOP went into the National Crime Agency, it seemed to lose its teeth and identity a little. I know the hon. Lady tabled an amendment to that Bill to that end, but we need to ensure that the whole police force understands online abuse, how to refer it and how to act on it. Online crimes are as depraved as those that happen in the real world, and in sentencing terms need
to be seen as involving the same degree of violence towards a young child. We seem to think that, because online crimes happen in the virtual world, they do not matter as much, but they really do.

Liz Saville Roberts: I very much praise the child abuse image database, which is evidently helping to deal with the backlog of forensic work on digital devices. None the less, there were 410 victims of child sexual exploitation in the first months of last year, and those victims need support. This is not just a matter of dealing with the evidence; it is about how we actually support those children afterwards. The figure of 68,000 that the hon. Lady mentioned is a terrifying number of lives to have been affected.

Sarah Champion: It really is, but let us scale that internationally. The Internet Watch Foundation does fantastic work. When it finds an image, it takes that image down and reports it to the police, and the police will act on it. Google and Facebook get a lot of criticism, but they are doing what they can to manage, contain, report and take down offensive images. We have really good legislation on that kind of thing in this country, and there is really good legislation in Europe, America and Canada. If any of the creators of child abuse websites are in those countries, we can do something swiftly. However, there has been a proliferation in third-world countries—particularly those in south-east Asia—of the most heinous forms of child abuse. I will not go into detail; I will just say that there are “pay as you view” systems there—sorry, it gets me every time. We cannot do anything about that, because unless those countries sign up proactively to address this issue, all that we will be doing is shifting the problem from one country to another. I urge the Minister to work with her international counterparts to get absolutely zero tolerance across the country and around the world.

Mrs Miller: There is one way that we can tackle that problem: through payment systems. It is important for the Minister to respond to that point with particular regard to putting pressure on international payment systems to try to address the problem that the hon. Lady is talking about. The previous Prime Minister worked hard on the use of splash pages to try to obscure the pages that internet companies may not be able to take down. Some of the very best people work in the internet industry. Does the hon. Lady wonder, like me, why we are not seeing more innovative ways of resolving the sorts of problems she is describing?

Sarah Champion: I do, but given the proliferation of such abuse, we are always lagging behind. There are twisted people with the life mission of abusing children and sharing these images. Sadly, we are always playing catch-up to them, which is why we always need to send out the strongest possible message: “This is not tolerated. We will come after you, and we will prosecute you.”

We also need to accept an uncomfortable truth. A survey by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children found that one in five indecent images were actually generated by children themselves. I would like to explore two parts of that issue. The first is sexting. Young people are sexually curious—they always have been and they always will be—and we should celebrate that; it is part of developing. However, they need guidance on the consequences and boundaries of that and the long-term impact of putting something into the ether of the internet.

There is a lot of pressure on young people to upload more and more explicit images. The young girls I have spoken to in particular do not realise that there are perpetrators out there who go through Facebook or chatrooms harvesting images, and a large proportion of those images actually appear on paedophile websites. When a girl sends a picture to her boyfriend and he uploads it as a “joke”, it is very likely that it will not just be her boyfriend who sees it, but there will be a vile old man in a room somewhere looking at it. That is one of the things that we need to get across.

Esther Rantzen is doing some fantastic work on this issue and is looking to create an extension of ChildLine, specifically for teenagers, called “Is that okay?” Young people are saying that they are not quite sure what the boundaries are or what is appropriate, so we need to step in and tell them—probably through the internet, because that is where they get all their information from—what is okay and what the consequences are.

One of the things that started me on this crusade to do something to make people aware of the threats on the internet was that last autumn a mum came to one of my surgeries absolutely distraught and devastated because she had found that her 12-year-old was uploading very sexually explicit videos of herself to a chat website. She was getting a barrage of responses and an awful lot of pressure to keep uploading images. When the mum spoke to her daughter, the daughter said that it was fun, it was up to her, she could do it herself, there was no harm in it and the man was her boyfriend. The mum tried to explain the consequences, but the 12-year-old was not listening, so the mum went to the police. The police said, “Well, it’s just a bit of fun, and she’s choosing to do it.” The mum went to social services, and they did send round a social worker, who met with the girl and explained some of the dangers. Both services then backed off.

The uploading of the videos got more extreme. The mum telephoned round again and was told to take the phone off the daughter. As the mum explained, “That’s all very well—I can take the phone off her—but what about her friends who have phones? What about the iPad that her brother has? What about the computers at school?” The mum had come to me because she was desperate. She said, “I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to stop this. I can’t find any advice.” I created a website called Dare2Care, where we have brought together all the information about this issue. Parents are crying out for the tools and the understanding to protect their children online, and I urge the Minister to do all that she can to circulate that information.

The mum tried to take the phone off her daughter and, lo and behold, the daughter stole her phone and hid it. It was only when the mum went to the police with some of the images and videos that her daughter had taken and said, “This is what she’s doing,” that the whole child protection system suddenly swooped down. It swooped down to protect the child, but I have a mum who is devastated that she let her child down, and I am devastated that as a country we let that mum down. That mum will be representative of mums around the country. That is why I urge us to make sure that all parents and professionals are aware of this issue.
Why is this happening? The internet is a relatively new phenomenon. Sadly, we have always had paedophiles, but whereas before they might have taken a couple of years to groom a couple of children, now they will have a phishing exercise. They will check out a thousand emails to children, and they will target the one or two who are vulnerable. That process, which used to take years, now takes days or hours. Paedophiles’ reach has become enormous.

Another thing to which I draw hon. Members’ attention is online porn. Again, we have always had porn, but the internet is giving it a new, more sinister overtone. The NSPCC and the Children’s Commissioner surveyed 1,000 children aged between 11 and 16, and found that at least half had been exposed to online porn, with 94% having seen it by the age of 14. A Girlguiding survey found that among girls aged 11 to 21, seven in 10 feel that the increase in online porn contributes to women being treated less fairly than men, and 73% believe that pictures such as those on page 3 have that effect.

Again, I give my own story: when I was 14, a gang of us had a porno mag that we kept in our den. Looking at an image of a naked woman is very different from looking at a video of someone being gang-raped, and that is what our children are finding. There is no suggestion or imagination; this is basically an online manual of how to abuse a woman, and it is predominantly, by far, the abuse of women that is happening in porn.

From a child’s perspective, they are curious about relationships, they try to find out and they find out by going online. What do they find? Porn. I have had boys in my constituency who are really anxious about having sex because they do not want to strangle their girlfriend, and they think that is what they have to do. I have girls in my constituency who are terrified about having to endure the violence, but they want to have a boyfriend so they think that is what they have to go through. They have no background to let them see that as a fantasy. They have no background knowledge of consent, of respect and of the ability to say no.

What is the solution? Basically, it is to give all children understanding around resilience and relationships. Currently, children are not learning about the dangers of the online world, or about respect, sex or consent. Sex Education Forum found that 53% of pupils have not even learnt how to recognise grooming or sexual exploitation. Charities, experts and survivors of abuse are all united in saying that improving children’s awareness of respect for relationships from a young age is the best way to prevent child abuse. Introducing compulsory, age-appropriate resilience in relationship education in schools would show that the new Prime Minister, the new Education Secretary, the new Home Secretary and the new Minister are serious about acting to prevent more child abuse.

What I am saying is that we need to give the children the tools to protect themselves. I urge that to happen from the youngest age. For example, as soon as children go into school, I want them to be taught about “No means no”. If someone wants them to keep a secret that makes them uncomfortable, they should tell someone else and they should be listened to. I want them to understand that there are people who are bad out there and that they can tell people if they feel uncomfortable.

I am not talking about teaching five and six-year-olds about sex—nothing about that—but when two-year-olds start to go to playgroup, we teach them not to snatch toys and not to push children over, so why can we not also teach them about respecting themselves and other people in the language they will understand? The NSPCC runs the fantastic PANTS campaign, which teaches about just that: what is in your pants is yours and is private. That is a very simple message that we can get across.

The other key thing is to ensure that parents and professionals know and understand the signs and symptoms and how to tackle the suggestion and the actual online abuse that is happening. We need to arm them in advance, because as I have said, this is a generational crime. We are not, and have never been, in that submersive environment as young, malleable children, so we need to ensure that everyone who is there to protect our children understands the effects of that and also how to prevent them. I have to say—not least because we have a Select Committee Chair in the Chamber—that the Select Committees on Education, Health, Home Affairs, and Business, Innovation and Skills all recommend statutory relationship education.

I have three asks of the Minister. The first is a public awareness campaign. I have mentioned my campaign, Dare2Care, which is free to take and use. All the major charities and academics have contributed, as well as survivors and campaigners, so all the information about preventing child abuse is there. Secondly, she knows that there is already a good e-safety course, which goes to all children in all key stages, but it focuses more on data protection and personal security than on recognising and dealing with abuse. There will be some fantastic teachers who will ensure that online safety in its broadest sense is happening, but I urge the Minister in her guidance to ensure that that is a serious component. The other, final point is about relationship and resilience education for all children to prevent online abuse. I also say to the Minister that we need to focus on literally all children, whether they are home schooled or not and whatever sort of school they go to.

The Government have done quite a lot in this area, but they need to do more, because I do not think they recognise the scale of online abuse that is happening and the potential dangers to our children. I ask the Minister to please take up this campaign, because our children depend on her.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): I advise Members that I will go to the Front-Bench speakers at 5.18 pm at the very latest and that the debate will end at 5.38 pm.

5.7 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Many thanks, Mrs Moon. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again. May I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing the debate and to the Minister on her new role? I want to speak only briefly, as I have a specific concern that I would like to draw to the Minister’s attention.

As we know, schools play a vital role and are in a strong, if not unique position to identify concerns around child abuse and child protection. However, I have concerns that the training that teachers in schools receive is not
up to the challenges that they as teachers, as well as parents and pupils, face in an ever-changing digital world. I therefore completely support my hon. Friend’s call for comprehensive and age-appropriate relationship and resilience education and for much better online and face-to-face support for parents and teachers.

I would really like that training to include the specific issue of online dating and dating apps in particular. This issue was raised with me recently by a Sheffield teacher who teaches at a special educational needs school and has been concerned to see young girls using apps such as Tinder and happen to look for older men. The concerns around that are obvious: either older men are deliberately looking for young girls or young girls are pretending to be older than they are to get an older boyfriend. As my hon. Friend said, that is not exclusive to vulnerable children; it affects all children.

I understand that the cyber-safety training that teachers currently receive mostly covers issues such as “Be careful who you speak to” and “Make sure they are who they say they are while online”, but it does not cover girls, or indeed young boys, out there on dating sites in frankly perilous circumstances. Take Tinder, for example, which has 50 million users worldwide. Last month, it rightly took the step to ban users under the age of 18. Previously, it had an age restriction of 13, but it only allowed those aged 13 to 17 to view profiles within that age bracket. The issue now is that Tinder takes its data and data verification from Facebook, which can easily be manipulated and falsified. There is every chance that fake Tinder profiles could be set up to exploit and groom children. Facebook even allows people to change their ages after they have signed up to profiles, so the risks are enormous.

I would therefore simply ask the Minister to consider making representations to Tinder and similar dating apps and sites on this subject. If she is willing to do that jointly with me, as shadow Digital Minister, I would be happy to join her in that. We absolutely must be pushing them to ensure there are robust age verification tools across all such platforms. Secondly, will she consider making representations to her colleagues to consult on the training that teachers receive in this area to include dating sites and their appropriate use?

The world is changing so quickly, so teachers and all safeguarding professionals—and, most importantly, parents—must be aware of any opportunities that could be exploited to harm children. I encourage the Minister to ensure that all training in the area is updated and reviewed on at least an annual basis to ensure that it is as up-to-date as possible.

5.9 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on her introduction, and I clearly concur. The NSPCC says those statistics show that the internet was used in 3,186 sexual offences against children in the last year. The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) sponsored a debate in the main Chamber last week along the same lines as this one, outlining the issues. I commend her for her presentation on that day and for her interventions and participation today.

Parents can make a difference by censoring what their children see online, but with more devices available and more methods to access the internet, the Government ultimately have to take action to ensure that young people and children are protected online. In her introduction, the hon. Member for Rotherham gave that horrifying example of a young daughter who thinks it is all right to do those things, with her frustrated mother protectively saying “No, it is not”, and going to the police and the social services and all of those things without any success or response. That frustration, which the hon. Lady so convincingly put to the House today, underlines the problems for parents in how difficult it can sometimes be to win over a child who might not know their own mind.

It is difficult to strike a balance. I believe the Government should do more to ensure that the Minister’s response today will therefore be important. It is important for Members to recognise that getting it right is difficult, but more needs to be done to prioritise the issue—the debate is a way of doing that—and strike the balance so that the Government can make a difference for those affected and those at risk. Whenever we hit a brick wall or an obstruction, we look to those who can help, and we look to the Government for legislative change. That is what the debate today is about, and what the debate in the main Chamber last week was about as well. It may be difficult to get it right, but it is essential it is resolved. The longer it takes, the more young people and children are at risk of being victims.

It is clear that this is not just an issue for the hon. Lady’s constituency of Rotherham, but an issue for us all, including in my constituency of Strangford in Northern Ireland and every hon. Member’s constituency in the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Some 259 sex crimes were allegedly committed at schools in Northern Ireland and reported to the Police Service of Northern Ireland in just three years. Officers in Northern Ireland recorded 66 school sex attacks that were related to the internet in 2012-13; 79 attacks in 2013-14; and 114 assaults in the latest academic year of 2014-15. Data supplied by the PSNI to the NSPCC showed there were 139 recorded sex offences against children involving the internet in the past year.

Those figures show the growing problem. The hon. Lady said that in her introduction, and I clearly concur. The NSPCC says those statistics show that the internet was used as a “gateway” to sex offences against children. How can we more aptly describe exactly what has taken place? One child being a victim is one child too many. The time for action to make that statistic zero, as it should be, is now. Data from 38 out of 43 police forces suggest that the internet was used in 3,186 sexual offences against children in the year to 31 March—that is equivalent to eight per day. That is a horrendous figure. It should shock all of us in this Chamber and should shock society. It should vitalise us to ensure that the Government can make legislative changes and control it.
I know the Member from the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), will speak shortly, but in Scotland the number of adults targeting children with indecent communications online or via text increased by 60% from 2013-14 to 2014-15. If such figures in Scotland were replicated nationally, it would show that the internet is becoming a hotbed for abuse against children. It is clear that there needs to be a framework in place to stop it, which is why we need the debate and Government action.

According to the data, a majority of offences in Northern Ireland—a total of 105—involving 12-15-year-olds, but in 30 cases the victims were aged 11 and under. My goodness me. If that does not shock us, it should. I think we are all shocked when we hear those figures. Pure innocence destroyed at a very early age. The crimes include horrendous stories of young people being forced to send pictures of themselves to adults who are posing online as young people when they are quite clearly not. Let us be honest. The repercussions are not just the traumatic effects upon those children—some of those young people have committed suicide as a result. It drives them to extremes at a vulnerable time. It is vulnerable people being taken advantage of.

To think that an adult could do such a thing to abuse a young child’s innocence and trust is absolutely despicable, but unfortunately the reality is that there are such monsters out there and it is time to get the laws, the law enforcement and the awareness and attitudes right so that those monsters—those abusers and scum of the earth—can no longer be at harm. We all appreciate the difficulty of striking a balance and of finding a remedy that works without infringing on other areas and without unintended consequences, but the stats and the figures cannot be ignored. The pain and the hurt cannot be ignored. This issue is only getting worse and it needs to be bumped right up the Government’s priority list and addressed sooner rather than later.

We look to the Minister for her response. I know she is a compassionate lady and I am convinced her response will be one we are heartened by. I know she wants to see things happening in the way we all want to see, but we have to help those vulnerable people right across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In conclusion, I ask the Minister if we can work together—the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and us here at Westminster—to rid society of this scourge once and for all.

5.16 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I welcome you to your post, Mrs Moon, and I welcome the Minister and the shadow Minister to theirs. It is excellent to see strong and confident women in those positions and I am sure they will take their challenges and responsibilities seriously. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing the debate on an issue that she has worked and campaigned tirelessly on, not least through her work on Dare2Care. It is fair to say she has gone above and beyond her public duty to tackle this issue. She takes it incredibly seriously, which I am sure all hon. Members in the Chamber also do.

This is a broad debate. Online abuse covers any type that happens on the web. We have already heard about the role of social networks, messenger services, chatrooms, playing online and mobile phones. Anecdotally, as one of the younger Members in the Chamber, I received my first mobile phone at the age of 13. It was a Nokia 2210, on which someone could play snake or push their luck by texting home and asking if they could stay out late.

That was what mobiles meant to me and my generation but times have certainly changed, with 24/7 social media online. I cannot even keep up with the current trend of Pokémon Go, and I am obviously too busy to play it. Through social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, online abuse is a new and growing phenomenon. With the increasing use of the internet across the UK and the world, and with the advent of smartphones, our young people are now more vulnerable than ever before, and traditional understanding of child abuse has been deepened and compounded by that fact.

At this point, it is important to recall the words of the hon. Member for Rotherham and many others who have contributed to the debate highlighting the instances of bullying, in particular of the LGBT community; the rates of suicide and self-harm, which cannot and must not be ignored; the influences of apps, games and other online devices; and the role and increasing accessibility of online pornography. It is fair to say that this is a very different world from the one I started in, and future generations will come into a very different world still, so our resilience, understanding and approach are absolutely vital.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller)—I have the honour of serving on the Committee of which she is the Chairwoman—highlighted the need for protections in the design and build of apps. The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts)—I hope she forgives me for terribly pronouncing the name of her constituency—highlighted the need for databases, but how many instances go unrecorded? The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) highlighted the role of dating apps and the potential for fake profiles. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) recognised with his always measured and reasonable approach the need to strike a balance, and the need for all of us to work collaboratively across devolved nations and reserved competencies to ensure we tackle the issues head on, and that we do not underestimate the challenges we face.

Children, as we have heard, experience cyberbullying, grooming, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and emotional abuse through devices and services that have become integral parts of their social lives. We need to look only at the Channel 4 documentary “Cyberbully”, “Game of Thrones” star Maisie Williams highlighted to me and to many parents out there the challenges and difficulties that young people face simply by sitting in front of a PC, laptop or mobile phone. In this day and age, the internet gives abusers unprecedented access to children and the ability to contact them at any time, day or night. It erodes traditional safe spaces. Children can be at risk of online abuse from both strangers and people they know.

The NSPCC has outlined some of the difficulties for children facing online abuse. Children will often not tell anyone about online abuse because they feel guilty or ashamed. When they would like to tell someone, they
often do not know who to go to, and many will not even realise they are being abused. According to Ofcom, one in five eight to 11-year-olds and seven in 10 12 to 15-year-olds have social media profiles. The number of children who are at risk is increasing and we must do more to safeguard them.

The scale of the problem has not been pinned down by any definitive or official figures. The fact is that we simply do not know the scale of the problem, but that does not mean we cannot put protections in place to tackle it. In 2014, studies found that one in four children between the ages of 11 and 16 had experienced upsetting or abusive language online while on social networks, and one in three children had been the victim of cyberbullying. Youth engagement organisations such as DoSomething.org suggest that nearly 43% of children have been bullied online. More worryingly, in 2015 the Internet Watch Foundation identified 68,000 websites containing child abuse images.

If we dispense with the statistics for a moment, it is fair to say that we do not yet know the full scale of this issue, but we know we must do more to tackle it. It is hard to underestimate the work that must be done and is already being done by many charitable organisations to tackle child abuse. The information and statistics supplied by the NSPCC and other charities and organisations are up to date and highly informative in dealing with abuse.

I want to highlight the work of the Scottish Government—I say this not to be political, but simply to enhance the debate. Since 2009, online safety has been monitored by the Scottish Government-led stakeholder group on child internet safety, which has made a number of recommendations. In recent years—as early as 2014—those recommendations resulted in a refresh of national guidance and child protection policies. Recent developments such as the national action plan for tackling sexual exploitation and the cyber-resilience strategy outline that Scotland takes this issue incredibly seriously. The Scottish National party condemns all instances of online abuse and welcomes any efforts to strengthen legislation to tackle child abuse. The information and statistics supplied by the NSPCC and other charities and organisations are up to date and highly informative in dealing with abuse.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady is eating into the Minister’s time. Can she bring her remarks to a conclusion? She has had more than her allotted five minutes.

Angela Crawley: Forgive me, Mrs Moon. I will close by simply saying that, to tackle this problem and the scale of it, we must collaborate and co-operate with one another.

5.23 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing this very important and necessary debate? I congratulate her and other Members on the thoughtful and emotional speeches they have given.

Technology is a wonderful thing. It has moved on. I was 38 when I got my first mobile phone. Before that, I had a pager—something that not many people in this room will remember. However, that has come at a cost, and the cost is one that I fear is really not worth paying. The internet has provided our children with a world of new possibilities and opportunities. The digital age gives children access to knowledge, facts and friends all over the world, but the internet and the way it is being exploited by those intent on committing the most heinous crimes poses a considerable threat to the safety and wellbeing of all our children.

According to the Internet Watch Foundation, in 2015 more than 68,000 URLs were confirmed as containing child sexual abuse imagery, having links to the imagery or advertising it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham said, that figure is up a frightening 118% since 2014. Behind every indecent image online and every video or photo of abuse, a child has been harmed or abused in the real world. The victim is condemned to repeated violation and degradation each time the image is accessed. Perpetrators are using the internet to sexually exploit children through manipulation and coercion.

The NSPCC found that in 2014-15 the internet was used in eight cases of child sexual abuse every day, including rape, online grooming and live-streaming of sexual abuse. As technology has developed, so have the ways in which children suffer bullying, which often takes place online and is relentless, without any sanctuary or safety for the child. As the mother of a teenage son, I know—I have seen the texts and the vile Facebook posts that kids seem to think are a way of life these days.

In 2015-16, ChildLine provided 4,541 counselling sessions about cyber-bullying, which is the highest the figure has ever been. The impact of this behaviour on children can be devastating, reducing their self-esteem, impairing their ability to establish normal relationships and, in extreme cases, leading to mental health problems, including self-harm and, tragically, suicidal thoughts. Children also face peer pressure to share explicit images and engage in harmful sexual behaviour. As technology has developed, sexting has become an increasingly common activity. With greater access to the internet, children are exposed to more and more harmful content. Frighteningly, many children believe that pornography is an accurate representation of sex. Just over 53% of boys and 39% of girls who were surveyed by the NSPCC said that they thought pornography was realistic. The images of sex, violence and consent portrayed through pornography are distorting the very way in which boys and girls relate to one another.

The problems outlined in today’s debate are not new; they are not new, and the Government know all about them. I am sure the Minister knows that children are growing up facing a tidal wave of online abuse, bullying, harassment, peer pressure and exposure to totally inappropriate content, yet we do not give them the tools to protect themselves, to recognise abuse and exploitation and to build resilience in coping. We do not give parents the knowledge and confidence to keep up to date with the threats their children are facing. We do not give teachers and other professionals the training they need to support children.

Will the Minister tell us whether she has any plans to help proactively protect children from online abuse, exploitation and cyber-bullying? Does she agree with the former Education Secretary, the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), and with four Select Committees, MPs from across the House, children’s
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I wholeheartedly congratulate the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing this debate and raising an issue that is so incredibly important. It is good to see so many people in the room today, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who chairs the Women and Equalities Committee. I cannot tell Members what a privilege and honour it was to be asked to take on this role as Minister. I cannot think of a better job in government. I will be working with people across all political parties on preventing harm to children in our society.

Sexual exploitation of children, whether online or offline, is an appalling crime. I know that the hon. Member for Rotherham has campaigned tirelessly against it, and I do not think I need to tell the House how determined and committed the Government are to tackle it robustly. I would like to give my assurance to hon. Members of my personal commitment to this. On only my second day as a new Member of Parliament back in 2010, a paedophile ring was unearthed in my constituency. I grew up there and I went to school there. The community where that happened is where my family lived and I was deeply shocked. I have been on the journey of seeing what a devastating crime this is, not only for the people directly involved but for the whole wider community. I am utterly determined to use my time in this post to do everything to prevent it.

The Government are committed to improving the safety of children online and have a strong track record of working with the industry and the charity sector to achieve this. The UK Council for Child Internet Safety, which is co-chaired by Ministers, is a multi-stakeholder forum representing more than 200 organisations that are committed to internet safety. It brings together the Government, industry, law enforcement agencies, academia, charities and parenting groups to work in partnership to help to keep children and young people safe online. Its achievements include the roll-out of free network-level filters for the vast majority of broadband customers and automatic family-friendly, public wi-fi in places where children are likely to be. It has also developed guidance for providers of social media and interactive services to help them to make their platforms safer for children and young people under 18, and another for parents and carers whose children are using social media.

The hon. Lady mentioned children accessing pornographic information and images online. The Government have consulted on this and are introducing measures in the Digital Economy Bill to prevent access to pornographic material online without age verification. I am sure she will agree that this is a really important step forward. We will carefully monitor the implementation of the age verification measures.

Sarah Champion: I am sure the Minister is aware that almost any 12-year-old in the country can get round any blocks and devices to try to prevent them from accessing content. Will she consider piloting that verification with some young people, so that we use their experience to make sure it is as robust as she says?

Sarah Newton: It is a really good idea to get children involved as the implementation goes ahead and I will take that away.

We are clear that abusive and threatening behaviour online, whoever the target, is totally unacceptable. We expect and demand that social media companies have robust processes in place to address inappropriate behaviour on their sites, including the provision of clear reporting channels and prompt action to assess reports and remove behaviour that does not comply with their terms and conditions.

As we have seen today, there is an even more insidious threat facing children online: sexual exploitation. Our response to that is rightly robust and includes action by law enforcement agencies against online offenders, developing new capabilities to find and safeguard victims, and working with the internet industry to remove illegal images. All police forces and the National Crime Agency are now connected to the child abuse image database—CAID—which reduces the time taken to undertake investigations and identify victims. A new victim identification suite has been established by the National Crime Agency with access to CAID. In 2015-16, UK authorities identified more than 450 victims from abuse images, more than double the number in the previous year.

The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts)—I am sorry if I mispronounced the name of her constituency—rightly questioned the resources for digital forensic teams in forces around the UK. These are operational matters for local police officers, but I am aware that real improvements have been made in the prioritising of resources for this work. Officers have been working with the NCA to use the tools that are constantly being developed. It is an area where we have to be vigilant all the time through the use of technology to enhance identification and processing. I will be keeping a careful eye on that and working on it with the police and crime commissioners.

We were talking about financial resources. In 2015-16, the NCA received an additional £10 million of investment for further specialist teams to tackle online child sexual exploitation. That enabled a near doubling of its investigative capacity to tackle such exploitation. A joint NCA and GCHQ team has been established to target the most technologically sophisticated offenders.

Our law enforcement response is delivering effectiveness against offenders. In 2015, 2,861 individuals were prosecuted for indecent images of children offences, a 27% increase on the previous year. In co-ordinated activity in the nine months ending last November, undertaken by the NCA and 40 police forces, 399 children were safeguarded and 682 individuals were arrested, all of whom were suspected of making, distributing and/or possessing indecent images of children.
The NCA also works to protect children and young people from abuse. The Thinkuknow education programme provides resources for use with children and young people, helping them to identify the risks that they may face both online and offline, to understand how to protect themselves and to know how to seek further support. In 2015-16 alone, just over 1.5 million primary and just under 2 million secondary school children received face-to-face education sessions from Thinkuknow’s network of more than 130,000 professionals, and the number of children and young people reached through Thinkuknow was over 205,000 more than in the previous year. Thinkuknow’s educational resources, including films, cartoons, lesson plans and websites, educate children about keeping themselves safe from sexual abuse and exploitation.

As several hon. Members rightly pointed out, schools have a critical role to play in protecting children from the risk of abuse online. E-safety is now covered at all key stages in the curriculum, including key stages 1 and 2, reflecting the fact that younger children are increasingly online. I will very seriously consider the recommendations made by the hon. Member for Rotherham today about what more can be done in that curriculum development.

Safeguarding is now a key consideration in all Ofsted school inspections. As part of their assessment of safeguarding, inspectors need to consider pupils’ understanding of how to keep themselves safe from relevant risks such as exploitation and extremism, including—

5.38 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Thursday 21 July 2016

[Mr Adrian Bailey in the Chair]

EU Exit: Devolved Governments

1.30 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered devolved governments and negotiations on the UK leaving the EU.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. One of the great privileges of being back on the Back Benches is that I can not only participate in these debates, but apply for them. I am grateful to the House for allowing me this debate. It follows on the back of early-day motion 325. One of the other unenviable privileges of being on the Back Benches is that I can now table early-day motions. I hope that all Members will sign my EDM once they have heard this debate.

Normally, I would say it is a great pleasure to hold this debate, but in many ways I would rather we were not. The repercussions of our vote to leave the EU will be profound and far-reaching in Scotland and across the United Kingdom and the European continent as a whole. We are already beginning to see the impact on our economy. The value of sterling has fallen against the euro, the dollar and most other international currencies, and remains highly volatile. Many businesses have predicted that Brexit will have a negative impact on their fortunes. The International Monetary Fund has revised down its forecasts for UK growth and said that Brexit risks throwing “a spanner in the works” of the global economy. Those of us who campaigned to remain in the EU warned of those obvious consequences and others as a probable outcome of our vote to leave. What was dismissed as “Project Fear” by many, we are now seeing as “Project Fact”, emphasised by today’s survey of German businesses, which concluded that 56% of them would want a hard bargain when negotiating with the UK.

We have to deal with what is in front of us and get the best possible solution for the UK and, for the purposes of this debate and my responsibilities, for Scotland. The evidence suggests that support for leaving was strongest in the most deprived areas of our country. I witnessed that myself at the Glasgow counting centre. In my constituency, the more affluent the area, the larger the remain vote. We have a responsibility and a duty as politicians to reach out to those who voted leave to strive to understand why and to respond to their concerns. I suspect that increasingly they feel that they have no stake in society. In general terms, although this is not necessarily always true, these are communities where the ravages of deindustrialisation have hit the hardest and where the economic recession has bitten deepest.

In many ways, there are pronounced similarities with the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, where some of the most deprived communities in Scotland voted to leave the UK. They also felt disillusioned and disfranchised in large numbers. Many of them had not cast a vote in many years, if at all. There is a clear problem for us to address, and we must find an amicable solution that reconnects communities to the political process and proves that politics can and will be a power for good in their lives. We must not let the Conservative Government or the Scottish Government—or any Government, for that matter—abdicate their responsibilities and abandon those who need help the most.

Immigration is an issue that came to dominate the EU referendum debate, and that concern must be addressed, but is immigration the true cause of the deep dissatisfaction felt in communities, or is it other things? There are six years of public sector austerity, the lack of a proper house building strategy, the failure to recruit adequate numbers of GPs, a dearth of well-paid, progressive, highly skilled work and crushing pressure on schools and hospitals. Those are failures not of the EU, but of national Governments north and south of the border. As such, they can all be resolved by a sea change in UK and Scottish Government policy. We should not allow the UK Government in particular to hide behind the EU over those public policy failures.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): We in Scotland have a demographic challenge that can only be aided by people coming to live and work in Scotland, and we need to encourage people to do so, perhaps with the post-study work visa, and there are EU citizens who still wish to come. We need to talk about how immigration enriches us and not demonise those who wish to come here to live, work and make a contribution to our society.

Ian Murray: That is precisely my point: immigration enriches society. Politicians have to be much braver about making the positive case for immigration. The arguments are not mutually exclusive; they all have to be set alongside the fact that if we have an influx of people, whether through migration or for other purposes such as work, public policy has to respond. The previous Labour Government had the migrant impacts fund, which was precisely that kind of response for local communities in need of additional resources to deal with the impact of the movement of people, whether immigrants or otherwise. That was scrapped in 2010 by the Tory Government, and we should look seriously at bringing it back. None of these issues is mutually exclusive, and I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. He was not only wonderful at intervening, but has successfully made me lose my place. I will get used to being back on the Back Benches shortly.

I was saying that we should reassure those who voted to leave and those who voted to remain that we are listening to them by demonstrating not just through speeches, but by our actions, that we are firmly on the side of everyone who voted in the EU referendum. In doing so, our first priority—it is a priority that needs to serve the interests of people across the entire country—should be to secure the best deal possible in the Brexit negotiations. That means adopting a negotiating stance that takes into account all views: those of people who voted to leave and those of people who voted to remain.

The building blocks for the negotiations must be what we want to retain from the European Union.

As Scottish Labour’s Westminster spokesperson, my focus today is obviously on Scotland, but I am sure many people from the other devolved Administrations,
such as Northern Ireland, which voted to remain, and Wales, which voted to leave—my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) is here—will have their say in the negotiations. I am sure Members from Wales and Northern Ireland will make those points.

Let us reflect on the vote in Scotland for a moment. Some 62% voted to remain, and 38% voted to leave. In my constituency, 78% voted to remain. I assume that was in no small part due to the contribution of the significant financial services sector to the economy in Edinburgh, the large number of businesses that export and the world-class universities that rely on EU funding for some of their world-leading research. Those factors all have to be taken into account as we set out our negotiating stance, so I will go through Labour’s priorities and principles.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman mentions his voters and the financial sector in Edinburgh. Does he accept that Scotland remaining within the EU would provide an opportunity for businesses to look north to Scotland, particularly in the financial sector? For those who are considering leaving London, there is an opportunity for his constituents, for Edinburgh, other cities in Scotland and Scotland overall.

Ian Murray: When I conclude my remarks, I will say that we should be looking at this as an opportunity, not only for Scotland, but for the whole United Kingdom. We are where we are. We need to ensure that the Government’s negotiations reflect what has happened, not only in Scotland but across the component parts of the UK, and make those arguments. I hope the financial services sector in the UK and in particular in Edinburgh reflects on where we are and makes those decisions accordingly. The uncertainty brought about by the decision to leave the EU is similar to the uncertainty that comes from any constitutional change that we have to deal with. I am delighted that the hon. Lady intervened, because she gave me an opportunity to mark my paper when I sat down. I am getting the hang of it.

I will go through the founding principles from which everything else in these negotiations should flow. We must be mindful of respecting and upholding the will of the Scottish people, not just in this referendum, but in the 2014 independence referendum. Those results have shown that Scots wish to remain part of the United Kingdom and retain the advantages of European Union membership. I understand that that is not a particularly easy thing to achieve, but they should be the founding principles of what we want to achieve in these negotiations. That is Labour’s starting point and forms the basis of what we believe should be Scotland’s negotiating platform.

That platform is informed by an excellent and aptly named paper written by Professor Jim Gallagher of Nuffield College, Oxford, entitled “The Brexit shambles: charting a path through the rubble.” Hon. Members can probably guess from the title where he is coming from on the issue. The paper identifies and delineates four priorities that should guide the Scottish and UK Governments—I have added one to make it five, because it does not mention the role of EU nationals and it is important to put that on the record as well.

As matters stand today, Scotland belongs to two Unions and gets significant advantages from both. The people of Scotland recognise that and have recently voted overwhelmingly for both Unions to be continued. The result of the referendums should be respected, but instead, they are being ignored. The political context in Scotland at the moment is that the Conservatives want Scotland in the UK but out of the EU, and the Scottish National party wants Scotland in the EU but out of the UK. Only the Scottish Labour party is clear that we want Scotland to remain in the EU and in the UK. The UK and Scottish Governments have an obligation to pursue every avenue in pursuit of that outcome, and to facilitate that, we should look at the priorities that should be put in place.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way—he is a decent man. He said that he does not want to see referendum results ignored but went on to state that Scottish Labour’s position is to keep Scotland in the UK and the UK in the EU. Given that that is not what people voted for across the UK, does he perhaps consider that his party is behind the curve on the issue?

Ian Murray: When giving way, I should have asked the hon. Gentleman whether he would sign my early-day motion—he probably will not, given its content. If he had been listening properly, he would have heard me say that what the people of Scotland have voted for in the two referendums is a position where Scotland is in the UK and the UK in the EU. Given that that is not what people voted for across the UK, does he perhaps consider that his party is behind the curve on the issue?

Ian Murray: When giving way, I should have asked the hon. Gentleman whether he would sign my early-day motion—he probably will not, given its content. If he had been listening properly, he would have heard me say that what the people of Scotland have voted for in the two referendums is a position where Scotland is in the UK and the UK in the EU. Given that that is not what people voted for across the UK, does he perhaps consider that his party is behind the curve on the issue?

Hannah Bardell: I will give way to the hon. Lady if she confirms whether she will sign my early-day motion.

Ian Murray: I will need to read the hon. Gentleman’s early-day motion before I make a decision; it would not be appropriate to make a comment either way without prior knowledge. I have a brief point. Does he not recognise that many people in Scotland voted for independence on the basis that his party and other UK parties said that the only way to retain Scotland’s place within the EU was to vote against independence?

Ian Murray: I am sure that you will rule me out of order, Mr Bailey, if we rehearse the well-trodden paths of the arguments about the Scottish referendum. If the hon. Lady does not mind, I will touch on some of them as we go through my contribution. Knowing the time, that it is the last day of term and that everyone is desperate to head to the shores of Spain—without a visa—to enjoy the sunshine with their families, I will get on to that as we go through.

The first priority—the Norway-type option that I referred to—is that we would have membership of the European economic area. UK, and hence Scottish, membership of the EEA would mean maintaining much of the same conditions of trade and freedom of movement as currently exist. I am not sure whether the Government’s position in the negotiations is to maintain the free...
economic union with the rest of the UK is beneficial for... the present arrangements, and the negotiations must underpin that point and reject all other arrangements. I will quickly skirt through the fourth priority, which is to explore all options for Scotland's future relationship with the EU. If we view this positively, it could turn the Brexit negotiations on their head, transforming a vexatious trial into an unprecedented opportunity. The hon. Lady mentioned that earlier. No one has ever suggested that the EU is a tremendous success and there are elements that Scotland may wish to relinquish. Equally, there are parts that Scotland may wish to retain. One aspect of the Brexit debate rarely mentioned is that it will greatly empower the Scottish Parliament. Many of the competencies, such as control over fisheries, agriculture, university research funding and environmental policy, will transfer directly to the Holyrood Parliament.

Hannah Bardell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for being so generous; I promise this will be the last intervention. He makes the point about the EU not being perfect. Does he accept that, with a seat at the top table, Scotland could have a greater voice and influence in reforming the EU as an independent country within the European Union?

Ian Murray: That flies in the face of the arguments of economic, currency and political union with the United Kingdom; that is essentially Scotland turning its back on a much more successful Union, to be part of the European Union. What people have said quite clearly is that they want Scotland to be part of the UK and part of the EU. If where we want to get to in the negotiations is an independent Scotland—I am sure that it is for the hon. Lady; if it was not, I would be incredibly surprised—the journey and the pathway to get there are slightly different from the pathway and journey towards an outcome that keeps the UK together and keeps Scotland with many of its current advantages within the UK as a member state of the EU. That should be the genesis of the negotiations. I appreciate that the Labour party perspective and the Scottish National party perspective on the outcome of that journey are different, but my contention is that it has to be about keeping both Unions together.

Michael Keating recently observed that, given the new powers that will fall within the competence of the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government could choose to align themselves with the EU and the directives that currently exist, rather than the UK, and that they can have either an informal or a formal relationship. The key thing is that there will be new and interesting opportunities. For example, the responsibility for delivering air quality lies with the Scottish Parliament but falls under the EU directive. The inter-governmental working between the UK and Scottish Governments means that the English and Welsh policy and the Scottish policy to deliver that directive can be different, but they are under the same umbrella. Strong inter-governmental working will be needed to ensure that example and many others are delivered across the UK.

Lord Falconer, the former Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs, commissioned a piece of work in the other place to set out options for a federalised
membership structure. Many people say that that is impossible to achieve, but we are in uncharted territory and everything should be on the table when we examine the possibilities for protecting the component parts of the UK and the advantages they get from membership of the EU.

The fifth and final principle that should guide these negotiations, particularly from a devolved perspective, is that we must protect the rights of EU nationals who live, work and contribute to the UK. Conversely, we must protect the right of UK nationals to work, study and live in other EU countries.

The UK’s political landscape is changing rather rapidly. A week is certainly a long time in politics these days. Brexit is perhaps the reckoning that the political system has been needing for a long time. It enables us to readdress where we are in the political landscape and think about how we respond to the big issues for communities. There is no doubt that the basic things that people took for granted—a job, a decent wage, a home of their own, a secure pension in old age and the idea that the next generation will do equally well if not better than the current generation—are increasingly becoming unattainable. Whether that is fact or perception, it is what people tell us. They are working harder and doing the right thing, but they are not receiving the benefits. I think that is the genesis of why the UK voted to leave. That is a failure not of the EU but of national Government.

Let us reflect on where we are. I would like the Minister to address some of these issues. The principle that the UK should come out of the EU but Scotland should stay in the UK and retain many of the advantages of being in the EU should guide the Government’s negotiations with the devolved Administrations and the EU. The Minister has the opportunity to set out the UK Government’s position on the devolved nations and Administrations today and be clear that the Brexit negotiations will protect their interests. He should reaffirm that the UK Government will recognise that Scotland voted to be in the UK and to keep the advantages of the EU. Those will be the foundation stones and building blocks for the negotiations. If we are optimistic about this, and if we all want the same journey and outcome, those should be the conclusions that we seek.

The former leader of the Labour party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), said last week in his Tony Benn memorial lecture:

“This can be a progressive moment. In any case, there is no point in the left sinking into gloom. The only answer is to rise to the challenge. The optimists have always been the people we need at times of greatest adversity. Today we need them more than ever.”

I hope the Minister is indeed an optimist and will respond positively to this debate.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. I should make it clear that I intend the Front-Bench contributions from the SNP, Labour and the Government to start at 2.30 pm. I will give the Front Benchers 10 minutes each, and I would be grateful if they were flexible, so that the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) has time to sum up briefly at the end. It would be helpful if speakers confined their remarks to a maximum of eight or nine minutes; otherwise, I shall start getting rather agitated.

1.55 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray). It is a pleasure to see him on the Back Benches, and it is always a considerable pleasure to listen to his erudite exposition. There is much in what he said that I can agree with; there are some parts that, as he will understand, I would not. I would describe it as a bit of a curate’s egg. I hope he will take that in the spirit in which it is intended.

Ian Murray: Pot, kettle, black.

Ian Blackford: You will get your chance later.

On 28 June, the First Minister of Scotland secured a mandate from the Scottish Parliament to seek to secure options for protecting Scotland’s relationship with the EU. I am glad to say that it was supported not only by the Scottish National party, but by the Labour party, the Greens and the Lib Dems, working in consensus for Scotland’s interests. Scotland’s Parliament came together to affirm its view on Scotland’s place within Europe.

We in the SNP argued ahead of the referendum that we should not be dragged out of Europe against our will. In the referendum, Scotland voted to remain in. Although England voted for Brexit, 62% of those who voted in Scotland voted to remain within the EU. We proclaimed our historic position as a European nation and our belief that our country is part of a wider family of nations.

Prior to the Act of Union in 1707, Scotland had for centuries established strong trading links with much of Europe, particularly northern Europe—the low countries, France, Germany, the Baltics and Poland, to name but a few. The Dutch town of Veere was essentially a Scottish trading port in the Netherlands. The Dutch conferred rights to Scotland, from a diplomatic point of view, in Veere. It was a two-way street. There was a significant European influence on Scotland. A walk through many Scottish towns, particularly on the east coast, shows the important influence of European architecture on our towns and cities. Dutch gable ends, for example, are prevalent in many parts of Scotland.

The point is that Scotland has long been at peace with itself as a European nation, predating the European Union by centuries. It is little wonder that many of us proudly define ourselves as Scottish and European. Alyn Smith MEP, speaking in the European Parliament, said this to Europe:

“please remember this: Scotland did not let you down. Please, I beg you…do not let Scotland down now.”

When we woke up on the morning of 24 June to find that the Brexiter had won in England, we recognised that there was a real threat that Scotland could be dragged out of the EU against its will. That is why it is important that we are having this debate on the issue of
devolved Governments and the negotiations on leaving the EU. There must be respect for Scotland’s position of having voted to remain. For us, remain means remain.

We often hear about parliamentary sovereignty. I am minded of the words of Lord Cooper’s judgment in the Court of Session in the case of MacCormick v. Lord Advocate. He said that “the principle of unlimited sovereignty of parliament is a distinctly English principle and has no counterpart in Scottish Constitutional Law.”

We hold to the principle that the Scottish people are sovereign. If that is the case, we cannot be dragged out of Europe against our will. The people of Scotland have spoken. The people are sovereign, and the UK Government must recognise that legitimate position in their deliberations and negotiations on Brexit. The UK might be leaving, but Scotland’s future remains as a European nation.

In the days after the referendum, there was a failure of leadership in the UK Government, who sought to come to terms with the circumstances they had created. I was proud that on 24 June, when we were looking for leadership, it was our First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, who spoke for many when she said: “Yesterday, Scotland—like London and Northern Ireland—voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU. We voted to protect our place in the world’s biggest single market—and the jobs and investment that depend on it. We voted to safeguard our freedom to travel, live, work and study in other European countries. And we voted to renew our reputation as an outward-looking, open and inclusive country.

Indeed, I want to take the opportunity this morning to speak directly to citizens of other EU countries living here in Scotland—you remain welcome here. Scotland is your home and your contribution is valued.”

Nicola went on to say:

“I want to make it absolutely clear that I intend to take all possible steps and explore all options to give effect to how people in Scotland voted—in other words, to secure our continuing place in the EU and in the single market in particular. We will also be seeking direct discussions with the EU institutions and its member states.”

Nicola was speaking for so many of us and, crucially, to the 173,000 citizens of Scotland who come from the EU—our friends, our colleagues and our neighbours, now fearful of their rights to remain living in our country, their country.

The Prime Minister has still failed to guarantee the rights of all EU citizens living here, with the suggestion that their rights will be used as a bargaining counter. What kind of society are we when we allow that level of fear to lay on the heads of many of our people, living in our country? It is immoral, wrong and something that the Government should deal with immediately, by protecting the rights of all EU citizens living not only in Scotland, but throughout the UK.

That message about exploring all options to give effect to how people voted in Scotland, to secure our place in the EU, has broad all-party and non-party support. What steps will the Minister take to reflect the votes and wishes of the Scottish people? Will he recognise the sovereignty of the Scottish people, and that we cannot be dragged out of the EU against our will? What will he do to recognise our rights? Will he agree to the Scottish Government, on behalf of the Parliament and people of Scotland, being given a full and formal role in negotiations on the UK’s future relationship with the EU?

We are often told that our position within the Union is one where we are respected. I say to the Minister: how are we to judge this? Actions speak louder than words. He should show us that his Government are responsible and will give the Scottish Government their rightful place. It is crucial that the Scottish Government are not only consulted, but at the table when negotiations are ongoing, to ensure that the voice of the Scottish people is heard.

We have been put in a position where our vital interests—businesses, jobs, universities, freedom to travel, workers’ rights and much else besides—are all at risk. A Conservative Government have put us into that position, so the onus is now on them to prove that our interests can be protected within the UK, because the fact is that the EU referendum has placed a big question mark over that.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh South spoke about the existing fiscal position, but the critical point about the fiscal position is that what we have today is a legacy of the UK Government. The fact that we want independence, ultimately, is not because Scotland is such a success story within the UK; it is because we know we can do much better. A crucial difference post-23 June is that one of the consequences of retaining our place in Europe is that Scotland becomes a destination. It is about us fulfilling our potential, creating opportunities for jobs and investment, growing the Scottish economy and, therefore, creating the tax revenues that will allow us to deliver on the social policies that we want. It is about a new Scotland, with its own place in the world—a bright, bold and optimistic Scotland, which is at peace with itself. That is what we seek to deliver.

The Scottish Government are committed to maintaining Scotland’s reputation as an outward-looking, open and inclusive country. We will look at all options to protect Scotland’s place in the EU. Today, independence is not the only option on the table. Our guiding principle in all our actions is to protect Scotland’s interests and our place in the EU. We will work with all parties to achieve that—I extend the hand of friendship to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South, if I may call him that, and to others, because we must ensure collectively that Scotland’s place is protected.

If it becomes clear that Scottish independence is the best and only way to achieve that, then it is an option that Scotland has to have. The Scottish Parliament must be fully involved in that consideration, and it is not something to be hurried. However, if the Scottish Parliament judges that a referendum on independence is now the best option to secure Scotland’s continued place in Europe, the Scottish Government have a duty to act. Will the Minister give a commitment today that if the Scottish Parliament calls for a referendum on Scottish independence, the UK Government will respect it? That is a simple question, which requires a simple answer. Do the UK Government accept that it is for the Scottish people to determine their own destiny?

The First Minister confirmed that the Scottish Government will now begin to prepare the legislation required to allow a referendum to take place if and when the Scottish Parliament so decides. The context for a second independence referendum is very different from that in 2014. A second referendum would not be a re-run of 2014, and it would be fought on entirely different grounds. The UK that we voted to stay in in
2014 no longer exists. Independence could be the best option to provide security for our economy and society, and to keep Scotland in the EU. It would be about preserving the status quo—indeed, independence would not be about Scotland wanting to leave, but about wanting to stay with what we have.

The Scottish Government are focused utterly on protecting Scotland’s interests and on doing all they can to ensure that Scotland remains in the EU. We consider that the process to exit the EU requires Holyrood’s consent and we cannot foresee circumstances in which the Scottish Parliament would give that without the guarantees that we asked for. Our focus is on protecting Scotland’s interests and remaining in the EU, not on frustrating England’s will to leave—it would be for Westminster to deal with the consequences of that situation. For us, remain means remain. We must not, we cannot and we will not be dragged out of Europe against our will. Westminster must respect the people of Scotland.

2.6 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his place, in particular because of his knowledge of devolution in Wales and because he was a remain campaigner. I very much hope that he will be successful in the Brexit negotiations, because a successful outcome matters to all of us.

The Prime Minister and her predecessor have made it clear that devolved Administrations should be fully involved in negotiations as part of the UK team. That is happening at an official level, but the commitment must remain when things move into the next phase, beyond the initial consultation. There needs to be a real recognition that in certain areas—in particular, agriculture and fisheries for example—there is no UK position. Those matters are devolved entirely, which heightens the need for the Welsh Government to be at the top table.

Access to the single market is absolutely vital for Welsh business. Welsh exports are worth some £5 billion a year, and we have a trade surplus with the EU, unlike the UK as a whole. It is vital that everything is done to keep that marketplace open for us, because some 200,000 jobs in Wales are in effect dependent on that export market for Welsh business, industry and agriculture. Anyone looking to set up a business in Wales must have reassurances about what sort of access they will have to the single market.

We are not talking only about local people setting up businesses in Wales; people from other EU regions do so too. We already have some 500 companies based in Wales that are from other areas of the EU, creating jobs and opportunities for Welsh businesses. They need some immediate reassurance about their situation and what it is likely to look like in the future. We have had statements from the big companies, such as Tata and Airbus, about the challenge that Brexit will pose for them. They will need as much reassurance as possible to stop them pulling out. We want to ensure ease of trade and competitive conditions for them to operate in the UK.

Let me turn to agriculture, on which we have our own devolved policy in Wales, as I have mentioned. Overall, the EU accounts for 40% of exports from Wales, but the figure for agriculture is far higher. The EU accounts for 93% of the lamb that we export, 35% of sheep, 92% of beef and 98% of dairy products—all going to the EU. Those Welsh beef exports are worth £52 million and the Welsh lamb exports £122 million. As I understand it, the EU imposes an average tariff of some 14% on agricultural imports from non-EU countries, with higher rates for individual items. I have even heard of rates of between 58% and 70% on beef products. It is essential that Wales is at the top table and we get the best deal we can for the continued export of our agricultural produce.

Before the referendum, Brexit campaigners promised that Wales would not lose out. The Minister for Farming, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), said:

“If we vote to leave on 23 June, the UK government will continue to give Welsh farmers and the environment at least as much support as they get now.”

But the new Environment Secretary said during the referendum debate:

“It would make so much more sense if those with the big fields do the sheep, and those with the hill farms do the butterflies. That would make a lot more sense for the UK and it’s perfectly possible but only if we leave the EU and sort it out for ourselves.”

Although we take conservation seriously and have an excellent record on that, I really do not want Wales to be reduced to one great big butterfly park, because active, vibrant farms are the lifeblood of our rural communities. It is essential that the Environment Secretary clarifies her position on these issues and the Welsh Government are right there at the negotiating table, finding out exactly what that statement means. I really hope that the Minister will ensure that support for Welsh farmers will continue.

To turn to other areas of EU funding, Wales benefits enormously from the European regional development fund and its vital expenditure on upskilling and infrastructure projects, particularly in the valleys and west Wales. Again, we want to ensure that Wales does not lose out in any way. I am particularly concerned, because in response to my question during Welsh questions last week, the Secretary of State for Wales implied that there would be a complete rethink of that funding. He said that

“simply replacing what are currently EU funds with another source from Westminster misses the point: the EU referendum sent out a number of messages, and those areas that receive most EU funds were the areas, sadly, that voted most strongly to leave the EU. We need to look at models of regional aid in a different way.”—[Official Report, 13 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 278.]

I am really quite puzzled about what he meant by that. Did he mean that he is thinking of cutting the money that goes to the poorest areas of our country?

That £600 million comes to Wales through a needs-based formula. Remember that the Holtham commission said that the Barnett floor was only a temporary measure and funding for Wales needed to move to a much more needs-based formula. Will we lose even the part of our funding that is already needs-based? As I say, the Secretary of State is not giving any reassurances on that. We need to know exactly where we stand, and it is extremely important for the Welsh Government to be at the table.
I know that other Members want to speak, but I want briefly to mention our universities. Because of the differences in funding for universities in Wales, significant decisions are being made. We want to have collaboration, as we can do 10 times more when we work together, and I hope that many cross-border projects will be able to continue.

I would like to say a quick word about EU nationals. Health policy is devolved to Wales, and we are extremely dependent on EU nationals and extra-EU nationals coming to work in Wales—particularly in rural areas, because many of our specialist staff like to stay near the big centres, where they perhaps feel that they have better promotion prospects. Those EU nationals need certainty. We have had two messages: the message that people from the EU would be able to stay was quickly followed up with the message that, “We are not quite sure whether they can.” We do not want them to hop off and apply for jobs back in their home countries because they do not have the security of knowing that they can stay and settle in Wales. We need that certainty urgently, and we also need guidance on what will happen in future. There have been delays in the past—visas have not been available for doctors from outside the EU—and we need to know what will happen with EU nationals.

Will there be a fast-track system, and how will that work? Another related but different area is the slaughterhouses and meat-packing factories, which are largely staffed by EU nationals. We need to know what their position is and how that can be taken forward.

No contribution of mine on Wales would be complete without a word on steel. We must make it really desirable for any investor in steel to be in the UK, and that will be so much harder now. There can be no excuses now about the EU causing delays. The Government have to act on energy prices, keeping out Chinese imports and ensuring that the conditions are absolutely right for our steel industry to stay here. For all those reasons, I want the Welsh Government to be fully involved in all the Brexit negotiations.

2.15 pm

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) on securing the debate; it is a real pleasure to see the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) in his place. It is 33 years since I was secretary to the Back-Bench energy committee when his father was Energy Secretary—that was my first official position here—and it is a great pleasure for many of us that my hon. Friend is in his place.

I make no secret of the fact that I am a reluctant Brexiteer. I am not even sure whether I can actually be classed as that. I campaigned to remain in the EU and I am very disappointed with the result, but like all of us here, I am a democrat and—to use those wonderful words—we are where we are. As we have heard today, the referendum result is clouded, because it has raised so many more questions than have been settled. I am also here because I am British—mother from Dundee, father from Fife; I am classic British.

Although some of the questions that hon. Members have raised will be settled in relation to their own territories, how they are settled does concern Westminster. Over the years, I have been as much a plumber here, interested in the mechanics of how things work and how questions are settled, as I have been concerned with the results themselves. There are some questions that will not be for us to settle, but ensuring that in this process Westminster speaks clearly, effectively and fairly with the devolved Administrations will be really important. The bulk of my remarks relate as much as anything else to that process and how we get it right.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh South focused rightly on the key issue in relation to Scotland—its vote to remain in the EU and how that is to be taken into account—but the exchange between him and the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) makes it clear that the Minister will have to give us some idea over time of how the conundrum of the Scottish position, with the issues that have been raised in relation to independence, will be taken into account by Westminster in the negotiations.

There are clearly regional distinctions in how matters affect different parts of the UK. The hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) spoke about the issues affecting Wales, including agriculture and the balance of exports. Scotland has its own sectoral interests, which are powerfully important. Will that in any way dictate the order in which the United Kingdom tries to deal with trade negotiations, for example? Some countries are more important to some parts of the UK than others. Will there be an order of preference for trade negotiations? We already know that we have a show of strength. As we start to get more, will all the countries that we are seeking trade deals with be dealt with at the same time and under the same conditions, or will some be seen as more important than others because of their importance to different parts of the UK? If so, precisely how will that be handled?

It would seem that there was no comprehensive planning for how to deal with that by either those who advocated a leave vote or the Government. Is that true? Was there more planning than we were made aware of? There has been no manifesto setting out quite what model we are after and what model will suit not just England but the different devolved Administrations. Will it be the Norwegian model, or will it be the more bilateral Swiss model? Will the World Trade Organisation model benefit certain parts of the UK? If so, how will we all handle that?

As the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber and I think also the hon. Member for Edinburgh South mentioned, immigration is seen differently in Scotland from in England because of the numbers and the ways in which people have moved. Again, if we are to negotiate in relation to trade deals, and trade deals vis-à-vis free movement, will that be handled differently in relation to Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales than it will be in England? If so, what is the mechanism for doing that?

What about the repeal of some legislation on the back of our EU negotiations? It was said during the course of the debates on leaving that some social legislation, perhaps affecting health and safety, and workers regulations would come into the negotiations. Really? Surely Parliament has a say on that. Can negotiations on that be conducted before Parliament has had a voice or even a vote on those matters, or are they to be ctagoed and somehow brought to Parliament for some sort of endorsement? If so, what happens if Parliament, which at the last count was weighted rather against leaving, does not feel that
that base of negotiation is actually in the best interests of all the British people? How is the process to be managed?

I will not dwell on that because time is short, but there are other sectoral issues to consider, such as manufacturing, which affects all of us. One of the phrases most commonly picked out during the debate was from Patrick Minford, who said, in effect, that the consequence of leaving would be that manufacturing would be all but eliminated,

“...But this shouldn’t scare us”.

I suspect some people might well be scared of that. How is that to be taken into account in the negotiations?

The key for me is that all the options require detailed parliamentary scrutiny, certainly from a Select Committee, and possibly a measure of parliamentary action in terms of votes and legislation. Do we have any commonality among ourselves about how that will be taken forward and what the process will be? We need to start there.

I spent some years in the Minister’s position, so I will not say “Can the Minister answer this?” and “Can the Minister answer that?” because he cannot answer all the questions asked in the debate at present. However, the debate has been a very valuable first step, and I hope it is helpful to know that even though some of us are not physically located in the devolved Administration areas, we care very much about how the process is handled by Westminster as a whole. We are just as interested in the outcomes, and I want to ensure that the Westminster mechanism fairly and effectively covers all the ground that needs to be covered. I am sure the Minister has that in mind. If he cares to venture any answers to some of the questions I have raised, I will be pleased, but I suspect that some of the answers will come out over time.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I would not normally allow a person who was not here at the beginning to participate in the debate, but as Mr Fitzpatrick did submit an application to speak and I know he was participating in a debate in the Chamber, I will give him a maximum of five minutes to contribute. I want to give as much time as I can to the Front-Bench spokespersons.

2.22 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I hope I can stay inside that time and leave a few minutes for the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), who is also standing. I am grateful for the opportunity to make a contribution on behalf of London. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) and I welcome the Minister to his new position. I wish him well.

Mayor Sadiq Khan is aiming to reach broad agreement for further devolution of London government in the aftermath of the EU referendum result. He wants to secure for City Hall and the boroughs significantly more control over the taxes raised in the capital and how public services are run. He wants to protect Londoners from the economic fallout of leaving the EU by creating more autonomy for London government. He says:

“This is essential to protecting Londoners’ jobs, wealth and prosperity.”

He believes that greater devolution for the capital will benefit not only London but the whole country.

Councillor Claire Kober, the chair of London Councils, said:

“We are united with the Mayor in calling for the greater devolution of powers from Whitehall.”

The Mayor says:

“I’m not asking for London to get a bigger slice of the British pie. That wouldn’t be fair. All I’m asking is that we get more control over the slice of the pie”,

referring to that which London produces.

The Mayor has made five demands of the Government. He calls on the Home Secretary to guarantee that EU citizens already in the UK can stay once Britain leaves. He asks for a commitment to make staying in the single market and the retention of passporting rights a top priority during talks with Brussels. He wants London to have a seat at the negotiating table. He asks for guarantees that key security and policing systems built up with European partners over many years are retained to help keep London and Britain safe, and he calls for discussions on more powers to London to start straightaway.

I recognise that many will have perceived this debate as being about Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, but London has very important, specific issues that need to be addressed. I am grateful for the opportunity to put the Mayor’s comments on the record, and I look forward to hearing the responses from the Front Benchers.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Stewart McDonald, I will give you three minutes.

2.24 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am very grateful to you, Mr Bailey. May I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) on securing the debate, welcome the Minister and say what a pleasure it is to follow a fellow south-sider from Glasgow? I think it was Winston Churchill who said:

“The trouble with committing political suicide is that you live to regret it.”

It feels as though we are living through a long political suicide at the moment.

The Brexit masochists have utterly ruined politics and turned it on its head. I will not allow my country—nor will my colleagues who join me on these Benches—to bear the brunt of that, because on the back of a Brexit result that Scotland did not vote for, the behaviour and response of the political establishment here in London has been shambolic. The Government and Opposition parties have decided to turn in on themselves and go on a back-stabbing regime that even Shakespeare would have thought had gone too far.

People not just in Scotland but in all parts of the UK—not least here in London—have looked on aghast at the abdication of responsibility, largely of people such as the new Foreign Secretary. They toured around the country on a big red bus, telling us to vote leave and take control, but when it came to it they could not get away from taking control far enough. And my goodness, what a sense of humour the new Prime Minister has in appointing who she has appointed to certain offices of state, such as our new Environment Secretary—now she will have to go and tell the farmers why Brexit was such a good idea. I would love to be a fly on the wall for that.
When I was first elected to this House, I made my maiden speech on the European Union Referendum Bill. I made the point back then that Tory Members had on glasses that were so rose-tinted that they could not see the problem they were walking into, so nobody can say they were not told that, in trying to kill one union, they may end up killing two, because all options are on the table.

I accept what my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) said. If it comes to a second independence referendum, that will have to be fought on different grounds and in a different way. We will have to give serious consideration to where we went wrong last time round, and I accept that we got some things wrong last time round. We failed to convince a majority of people to vote for independence. It was not the BBC or the Daily Record that managed to sneak in that result; we failed to convince enough people. But my goodness the mood has changed now, because my hon. Friend was also right that the UK that people voted for no longer exists.

I want to finish with an appeal to the Minister and to Members from other parts of the UK. Please try to understand the political mood in Scotland. That involves not just listening to what we in the Scottish National party have to say or what the hon. Member for Edinburgh South has to say. Try to engage with people in Scotland, because the farce that is Westminster politics is looking less and less appealing.

The farce that is Westminster politics is something that fewer people are willing to put up with, because as this place makes our country smaller and makes us look in on ourselves more, people will demand to do what was on the side of that big red bus, and that was to vote leave and take back control—re-establish ourselves as a contributing European nation. We are in uncharted and potentially even dangerous waters, but nobody can say they were not told at the time. I hope the Minister can give us some assurance—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order.

2.28 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. Like others, I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) on securing his debate and using his new found liberty—perhaps I should say independence—on the Back Benches so creatively in this last gasp before the recess. I also warmly welcome the Minister to his post. Westminster Hall has not been short of Brexit debates in the weeks since the referendum and that is likely to continue, so we will set up a tent, bathing facilities and so on for him, because I think he is going to be spending a lot of time in here. However, it would also be worth having a debate on the Floor of the House, now that there is a fully accountable Secretary of State. The House of Lords has spent an awful lot of time debating the Brexit result; we have yet to debate it on the Floor of the House. The attention in this and previous debates in Westminster Hall clearly demonstrates a desire on the part of Members to have a debate on the Floor of the House.

Nia Griffith: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that should be in Government time and not simply a Backbench Committee debate?

Patrick Grady: I absolutely agree. The Government, to their credit, genuinely recognised the importance of the Chilcot inquiry and found two days to debate it, so they ought to be able to find time for us to debate the Brexit result. In that debate, what Members will hear from SNP Members is the start and end point they have heard today: that it is democratically unacceptable for Scotland to be taken out of the EU against its will. We have been consistent on that, before, during and after the European referendum, which is why we have a mandate to argue that point.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am pretty sure I recollect the Leader of the House announcing this morning that in the September fortnight when Parliament sits there will be a debate on the petition on the EU referendum, but that will be in Backbench Business Committee time and not Government time.

Patrick Grady: Yes, and it will be here in Westminster Hall, so the point about the main Chamber still stands.

I will look briefly at how we got here in the first place, the responses of the devolved Administrations so far, the impact of Brexit and the way forward in negotiations and some of the possible outcomes, especially as they affect Scotland. It did not have to be this way. The Scottish National party moved an amendment to put in place a four-nation lock, so that all parts of the UK would have to vote to leave before the whole of the UK could do so. If that mechanism had been in place, we would not be in the Brexit situation we are in today, after the vote in Northern Ireland and in Scotland. In the 1978 referendum on the Scottish Assembly there was a 40% rule, which admittedly we disagreed with. Nevertheless, only 37% of the electorate voted to leave, and if that rule had been in place in this referendum, it would have meant that Brexit could not go forward.

One of the reasons for the divergent results was the divergent campaigns. The woeful campaign in England and Wales stands in contrast to the positive campaign that took place in Scotland, with unanimity among Scotland’s MPs and party leaders and overwhelming support for remaining among our MSPs and councillors. Like the hon. Member for Edinburgh South, my constituency voted 78% in favour of remaining. I take some of his points about a divergence in areas of greater deprivation. Nevertheless, even areas of deprivation in Scotland have benefited from the EU, and that is visible. I have made the point several times, but the road I cycled to school on when I was growing up in Inverness was built with European money—it would never have been built by Thatcher’s Government. I think that visibility of European infrastructure in Scotland added to the existing support.

We have heard from different Members about the responses from different areas of the UK. The Welsh leave result was a disappointment to many Members, including our friends from Plaid Cymru, who cannot be here today, and to the Labour First Minister. Much like the Mayor of London, he outlined a range of priorities to protect jobs and economic confidence and to ensure that the Welsh Government play a full part in discussions on the European withdrawal, retaining access to the single market and so on. Likewise, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) has put on record the Mayor of London’s demands. The hon.
Gentleman is welcome to maintain his European citizenship—as a Glaswegian by birth, he will be entitled to Scottish citizenship once we become independent.

Alistair Burt: I get it through my nan.

Patrick Grady: There we go. There are plenty of people in the House today.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Come one, come all.

Patrick Grady: There we are; it is an open invitation. Northern Ireland voted to remain, which would also have triggered the four-nation lock mechanism, had it been introduced.

But we are, as others have said, where we are. I take some of the points that the hon. Member for Edinburgh South raised about the potential impact on domestic policy and reform and on the broader need to re-engage our populations in the democratic process. I think we did that quite effectively in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, which may explain the different tone of debate that took place during the European referendum. On the question of more powers for the Scottish Parliament, our preference, as my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) said, is for Scotland to influence those powers as a full member of the EU at the top table, where those decisions are made. If that is the outcome and that is the only way of protecting Scotland’s place in Europe, that is what we will have.

The right hon. Member for North East Bed fordshire (Alistair Burt) made some considered remarks and reflections. They were not necessarily direct questions to the new Minister, but the fact that he is asking those questions reflects the fact that the UK Government really are playing catch-up on the result. They were not fully prepared for a Brexit result, which stands in contrast to the initiative and the momentum shown in Scotland. The First Minister, who spoke so eloquently—she was my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford)—was immediately out of the hatch, reaching out to leave voters and welcoming the terms. I think the Prime Minister met with the First Minister, and we welcome that willingness to listen and to commit, which she emphasised again at Prime Minister’s questions yesterday, but there is some need for clarity over the UK Government’s plans. The Prime Minister said article 50 would not be triggered until there is a UK-wide approach on the objectives of the negotiations, but the Secretary of State for Brexit has said that article 50 will be triggered early next year. It would be useful to have some clarity on that.

Patrick Grady: I heard the interview to which the hon. Gentleman refers; it was a useful preparation for today’s debate. It is clear that we want to maintain our access to—exactly as the Scottish Parliament resolution says—“Scotland’s place in the single market and the social, employment and economic benefits that come from that”.

In order to help to prepare for the transition, the First Minister moved quickly to put in place a standing council of experts to provide advice to her Government on how best to achieve our EU objectives. It is chaired by my constituent, Professor Anton Muscatelli, who is the principal of the University of Glasgow. That council is made up of specialists in finance, economics and European and diplomatic matters. It encompasses a range of political and constitutional opinions and was designed to provide the Scottish Government with access to a wealth of knowledge that has been built up over the years. The council will consider the impacts of the proposed changes to the UK’s relationship with the EU on Scottish interests and will advise Scottish Ministers throughout the coming negotiations on the best way to ensure that we achieve those Scottish objectives.

The Prime Minister met with the First Minister, and we welcome that willingness to listen and to commit, which she emphasised again at Prime Minister’s questions yesterday, but there is some need for clarity over the UK Government’s plans. The Prime Minister said article 50 would not be triggered until there is a UK-wide approach on the objectives of the negotiations, but the Secretary of State for Brexit has said that article 50 will be triggered early next year. It would be useful to have some clarity on that.

We have to recognise the result in Scotland. My hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber spoke about the sovereignty of Scotland, and we have a debate in Westminster Hall on the Claim of Right after the summer recess. If Brexit means breakfast in the UK—sorry, if Brexit means Brexit; I have made a bit of a dog’s breakfast of that—then in Scotland, remain should mean remain. The former Prime Minister said in his statement to the House after the referendum that his county of Oxfordshire had voted to remain, and implied that was somehow comparable to the result in Scotland, but Oxfordshire is not a devolved Administration. Oxfordshire County Council did not sign an Edinburgh agreement with the UK Government recognising in principle Oxford’s right to become an independent country should it choose to do so. Scotland did.

That is why the FM has said the option of a second independence referendum “must be on the table” for Scotland, and if independence is found to be the only way to secure Scotland’s place in Europe, a referendum would be “highly likely”. Any such referendum would have to command cross-party support in the Scottish Parliament, which is why it would be unacceptable for the UK Government to stand in its way. But we are not there yet. The Scottish Government have signalled their
intention to work constructively with the UK and with EU institutions and member states during the negotiations following the referendum result, but the result in Scotland was not for Brexit. It was for remain, and that result must be respected.

2.39 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is an honour to contribute under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

It is quite right today for the devolved regions of the UK to exert influence, particularly as the democratic mandate in favour of their remaining in the EU is so strong. I do not need to welcome the new Minister—we have already been in this Chamber debating Gibraltar this week, and some of the arguments are not dissimilar—but I would highlight the lack of planning in advance of the vote on 23 June. It seems rather irresponsible for a Government who knew a year in advance that they were going to have a referendum not to put any preparations in place. That is unforgivable.

May I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) for securing this debate? I am pleased that it will be followed by one in early September, as soon as we return, so that we can have the argument at greater length, once the team has had some time to establish itself and maybe recruit some negotiators. My hon. Friend was quite right to say that many of us are disappointed to even be having this debate. There certainly was not a “punch the air”, independence day feeling following the result in my constituency, where 75% of people voted to remain in the EU.

We know what the impact has been on the economy, in terms of the volatility produced and IMF forecasts being revised downwards. The impact has been felt particularly in low-income parts of the UK, producing the opposite result to what one would have thought. There is a lot more political work for many of us in the House of Commons to do—not necessarily in this place, but in those communities.

My hon. Friend was also right to emphasise the importance of protecting public services and to comment on the currency options, about which there is a lot of uncertainty, and on our future relationship with the EU where young people are concerned, particularly in terms of university funding and in science, research and development. I am pleased that Lord Falconer, who is an expert in these matters, and Lord Kerslake will be trying in the other place to establish a way forward, to help our deliberations not only in the devolved Administrations but here in Westminster, so that we can move forward with some kind of consensus.

I was very pleased to hear the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) mention the 173,000 EU residents living in Scotland. Indeed, many Members of Parliament across the UK have been contacted by EU citizens who not only feel a lack of certainty about their jobs and livelihoods, but feel that they were used as a bargaining chip in relation to expats living abroad. This is a quite unsatisfactory situation and one that I am pleased we have debated twice in the Chamber. I am sure we will be debating it again in the autumn.

Ian Blackford: What has changed since we had those debates in the Chamber is that we have a new Prime Minister. It would be good if the Government now reflected on the debates that have taken place and the uncertainty that exists for all EU citizens living throughout the UK. Can we not remove that cloud of uncertainty for them, so that they feel welcome, as they are, and can look forward to having a future as part of our communities?

Catherine West: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. Sadly, it was the Prime Minister, when she was in her Home Office role, who failed to provide that clarity. It is down to us to put more pressure on the Government in order to create clarity. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we are seeing a slightly negative climate in relation to EU citizens and those who come from abroad?

Ian Blackford indicated assent.

Catherine West: I am an immigrant myself, and there is a slight sense that people are not welcome. Indeed, we have seen an increase in violent abuse against people from abroad. All Members of this House certainly would want to stamp that out; I think we are united on that point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) made some excellent points about agriculture and fisheries. It is very important for Welsh farmers to be right at the front of these negotiations. I am sure that she, through her offices, will be making the point again and again about the importance of the tariff situation being clarified as soon as possible for basic products such as fish, beef, lamb and other exports. We know what a fragile situation many farming communities find themselves in. It is crucial that we in this House put their case again and again, because a lot of false arguments were made in the debate on the referendum. Farmers were told they were going to get part of the £350 million a week, as were the NHS and a number of other priority areas. We all know that money cannot be spent twice. We seek urgent clarification on agriculture, which is such a precious sector and yet is constantly being eroded and corroded.

I look forward to the Minister clarifying his position on that.

I was also pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli speaking in support of universities in Wales. We know what a crucial area of the economy education is as an export for Wales. There is a question mark over the position of EU nationals throughout Wales, be they teachers, students or in the workforce, where security is desperately needed. There is a delicate balance needed between the workforce not only in slaughterhouses and in fruit picking, but in more skilled occupations—for example, for nurses and doctors in the national health service. In some areas, up to 50% of the workforce are EU nationals—the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) could probably tell me the exact figure. We have a very high number of EU workers across the UK, and their position needs clarification.

My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli mentioned steel investors. We want to know exactly how the UK will replace the high-level negotiations that the EU undertakes on behalf of its members on steel. We would not want any sense of uncertainty to give an excuse to potential investors not to invest in our steel industry in Wales and other regions.

I know you want us to be brief, Mr Bailey, so I will be. The right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire made a number of important points and was super understanding of the Minister—I am not quite as
understanding; I want answers. The shortage of negotiators is appalling. That is what I meant by a lack of planning. If we know we will have to make changes, we should get people on board to do that. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is very hard-pressed, and I would like to see much more funding for it. I am worried about the separate Departments mushrooming, competing and all saying slightly different things. That is a risk for what the right hon. Gentleman called the plumbing— I used to call it re-wiring—in terms of the way things are done, not only in the Palace but across the piece in the senior civil service. This debate has led, I am afraid, to a shopping list of issues for the Minister, but I know he will be up to the task.

Finally, as a London MP, it was a delight to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). We are very proud of our new Mayor, Sadiq Khan, who is quite right to say that taxes raised in London—or a small proportion of them, anyway—could be spent more effectively in London. London Councils, which is now chaired by Councillor Claire Kober from the Borough of Haringey, says that we should see three times more money that is raised in London spent on vital infrastructure such as transport and housing, because we know it contributes in the longer term to the prosperity of the whole United Kingdom.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Minister, if you could leave a little time at the end for Mr Murray, that would be helpful.

2.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I will do my best. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey—not for the first time. I well remember serving under you on the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee where, among other things, we visited Scotland to look into another referendum. I thank hon. Members present from all parties for their kind welcomes and congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) on securing this debate, which is both timely and extremely valuable.

Before I go into the substance of the debate, I want to make a few opening remarks on the role of this new Department, because this is only the second debate that our new Department has answered. I am delighted to be joining the Department for Exiting the European Union, working with three new Ministers, led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), who is our Secretary of State. Our Department will oversee exit negotiations and shape the new relationship between the UK and the EU. I particularly welcome the request from the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for a debate in the main Chamber, which I will ensure is fed back, and I suspect he will not be disappointed when the House returns.

Our new Department has four main aims. The first is to lead the policy work to support the UK’s negotiations to leave the EU and to establish the future relationship between the EU and the UK. The second is to work closely with the UK Parliament, devolved Administrations, overseas territories and Crown dependencies and a wide range of other interested parties on what approach we should take to negotiations. I would like to reassure the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) that London will be certainly included in that. The third is to conduct the negotiations in support of the Prime Minister, including bilateral discussion on EU exit with other European countries. The fourth is to lead and co-ordinate cross-Government work, liaising with many Departments—including on agriculture, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith)—to work to lead the policy work to support the UK’s negotiations to leave the EU, to meet its challenges and to seize the opportunities and ensure a smooth process of exit on the best possible terms.

The new Department will equip the UK to prepare to make a success of leaving the EU: to meet its challenges and to seize the opportunities it represents. In my role as Minister in this new Department, it is essential that I have a good understanding of the interests and concerns of Members, the constituents they represent and the devolved Administrations. I am grateful for having heard today from so many Members from such a variety of parties.

This debate is timely and has been informative. It is just the start of a long process of consultation and I look forward to many more such debates, but I hope that I will not have to camp out permanently in this Chamber, as has been suggested. We have heard from both sides of the Chamber. My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) was extremely welcome with his enormous parliamentary knowledge. I suspect his plumbing skills will be much appreciated in the months to come.

Like 62% of the population of Scotland, 56% of the population of Northern Ireland and, I think, almost every Member in the Chamber, I voted for remain, but the decision has been made across the UK and we should no longer talk in terms of leavers or remainers. It is the responsibility of us all to secure the best possible outcome in the national interest of all UK citizens. We all need to work together to pursue this bold and positive agenda.

I recognise the point made by the hon. Member for Edinburgh South about least-affluent areas, which is certainly reflected in my constituency. Now, more than ever, we must work to make sure those areas can thrive.

The Prime Minister made clear her passionate belief in the United Kingdom and her commitment to engage fully with the devolved Administrations as we prepare for negotiations on the UK’s exit from the EU. I wholeheartedly share those sentiments and I look forward to working closely with colleagues from the devolved Administrations and Members of this House representing their constituents as we shape the future for the whole UK.

I have touched on the points made by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse. It is great that the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) spoke about respect. I assure him that whenever we have disagreements with his party, the Government have absolute respect for the Scottish National party and its role.

Ian Blackford: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; I know that he is short of time. I thank him for his remarks, but given that the Scottish Parliament has mandated the First Minister to negotiate on Scotland’s behalf to secure its place in the EU, will the Government...
Mr Walker: I think the hon. Gentleman realises that my remit in this Department does not cover the full breadth of constitutional issues, but there is certainly respect for Scotland’s position and the First Minister. The fact that the Prime Minister broke up a reshuffle to go to Scotland to meet the First Minister is an indication of that respect.

I repeat my personal commitment and that of the Prime Minister and the whole Government to involve fully the devolved Administrations in the preparations for the important and complex task ahead of us. There can be no doubt that we are working towards securing the best possible deal for the whole UK and that to achieve this we will need to work openly and collaboratively with colleagues in the devolved Administrations at official and ministerial level.

It has been useful to hear Members’ thoughts this afternoon on how the devolved Administrations can be involved in the negotiations, but I am sure that they understand that the format of the negotiations has yet to be decided.

Ian Blackford: Will there be role for the Scottish Secretary? I am not sure what his role may or may not be.

Mr Walker: The Scottish Secretary, like many interested parties, will of course be consulted and, as part of the Government, feed into the Cabinet process to inform the Prime Minister in her negotiations. The Prime Minister said when she met the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales that, as we prepare for the process, we will fully engage their Administrations to ensure we achieve a shared understanding of their interests and objectives. Detailed discussions have already begun at an official level.

Although I am an inexperienced and new Minister, I am not a complete stranger to the devolved Administrations. As I said earlier, when I served on the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, we visited Scotland. I also served for a number of years on the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs with the hon. Member for Llanelli—I am grateful for her welcome—and, towards the end of the previous Parliament, I served as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office. I am looking forward to renewing friendships in each of the devolved Governments over the coming months. I have also enjoyed engaging with Members for all three devolved legislatures as a member of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly.

Today, my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), the Minister of State in our new Department, is attending the Royal Welsh show, where I have no doubt he will engage widely with the rural and farming interests of Wales mentioned by the hon. Member for Llanelli, and perhaps with some of the exporters she mentioned. The Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland and for Wales, as well as the Minister of State in my Department and the Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State for Scotland and Northern Ireland, will be attending an extraordinary meeting of the British-Irish Council later this week. That demonstrates the UK Government’s commitment to understanding the priorities of the devolved Administrations, as well as our other partners in the Republic of Ireland and the Crown dependencies. There will be many more ministerial discussions and, I suspect—to reassure my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire—a great deal more parliamentary scrutiny of all sorts in the months to come.

It has been very good to hear hon. Members’ thoughts on potential settlements for Scotland, but the Prime Minister has been clear that the Union is very important to her and to this Government. She was also very clear with the First Minister that some of the ideas being brought forward are, in her view, impractical, but she is willing to listen to options that are proposed, and we will be engaging fully with the devolved Administrations.

A number of hon. Members referred to Lord Falconer’s involvement. I can assure them that his suggestions will be given proper consideration.

I heard with interest the five priorities that the hon. Member for Edinburgh South set out. I can assure him that they will all be given consideration and that the Department recognises the urgency of responding on the EU nationals issue. If he consults Hansard, he will see that I asked questions on that before my appointment to this role. We all want to see, as he said, securing the position of EU nationals in this country and UK nationals in the EU right at the top of the list of priorities.

I would like to reiterate the words of the hon. Member for Edinburgh South in an article that he wrote on 4 July:

“We all need to pause and reflect whilst the picture becomes a little clearer in the coming weeks and months.”

There is a long and complex period of analysis ahead of us. That starts now, and there have been very useful contributions to it in this debate.

I want to touch on EU funding, which was particularly mentioned by the hon. Member for Llanelli. I know that many hon. Members have expressed concern about it. Let me reassure them that I recognise how sensitive and important that issue is, and it is one of the Department’s top priorities. UK Government officials have already begun talks with devolved Administrations, and those discussions have started well. Of course, as long as we remain in the EU, those payments will continue, but I recognise that for the long term there is some uncertainty. For the longer term, a whole range of decisions will have to be made, including on funding. I am happy to commit to involving devolved Ministers and officials fully in that work.

I recognise also the points made by the hon. Member for Llanelli on steel. Very importantly, this Government are working closely with Tata, bidders, the Welsh Government and trade unions to support a sale and support a long-term future for the steel industry in Wales and across the UK. The former Prime Minister spoke with Carwyn Jones on 7 July about the situation, and we will continue to work as closely as we can with his Administration.

Catherine West: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: I will not, as I have only one minute to try to sum up.
As the debate has demonstrated, a range of sensitive and complex issues are involved in the UK’s exit from the EU. It will be the responsibility of myself and ministerial colleagues in the Department, working with colleagues across the UK and in the devolved Governments, to make this process work for all parts of our country. It remains the Government’s position that it is in the best interests of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK. We are at the start of a process of consultation, analysis and negotiation. I reiterate my commitment to involve the devolved Administrations fully in our preparations. Together, we should be able to realise a bold, positive vision of the future for the whole UK.

I welcome the comments by the hon. Member for Edinburgh South about optimism. In wishing him and all hon. Members in the Chamber the very best for the summer recess, I can assure him that the Department will be setting out optimistically to work through the summer in the interests of all parts of the UK.

2.58 pm

Ian Murray: It was remiss of me not to welcome the Minister. Perhaps it was because of his charm and the way he is willing to work together that I thought he had been in his ministerial post for some time.

Let me reflect on the debate. It has raised many questions. The right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), in his contribution, raised the competing challenges that we have. I would throw Scottish whisky into those sectoral challenges, which may be slightly different from other challenges.

The negotiations all go back to the building blocks and the destination. The destination for me, for the Scottish Labour party and for the Labour party as a whole is to ensure that Scotland’s position in the UK is assured but we do not lose sight of the advantages that we get from the EU. Those are the two mandates that the Scottish people have given us, and to disregard one mandate for the other would be wrong.

I have mentioned a number of times in the debate my early-day motion. It now becomes clear that the SNP will not sign it, because it says at the end that we want the Scottish people’s mandates to be upheld and to “remain in the EU and the UK.”

The fact that the SNP does not want to sign that or to give us any indication—in the contribution from the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady)—of where it wants to go with this perhaps highlights the fact that our destinations are different. I hope that the Government reflect on that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered devolved governments and negotiations on the UK leaving the EU.

3 pm

Sitting adjourned.
BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

UK Steel Industry

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade (Sajid Javid):

Since Tata Steel announced its intention to restructure its UK operations, the Government have worked closely with Tata, potential buyers and other stakeholders including the trade unions and the Welsh Government, to ensure a sustainable future for the business. We remain committed to that objective, and to ensuring the continuation of primary steelmaking in South Wales.

Following the referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU, and a review of the bids received for Tata Steel UK, the board of Tata Group announced on Friday 8 July its intention additionally to explore options for retaining ownership of the business with strategic partners, including through a possible joint venture with ThyssenKrupp AG. Discussions are at a preliminary stage.

Tata has also announced its intention to sell separately its speciality steel business based in Rotherham and Stocksbridge, as well as two mills that produce steel pipes based in Hartlepool. Around 2,000 of Tata’s UK workforce are employed in the businesses that will be sold. None of the businesses that will be sold are supplied with steel from Port Talbot, and are separate business units within the group.

I met the Chairman of Tata Group in Mumbai on 8 July. During that meeting, Tata Group confirmed again their commitment to achieving an outcome for their UK operations that provides the business with the best long term prospects for a competitive and sustainable future.

The Government are committed to working with Tata to achieve that objective. We will remain in close contact with Tata during the sale process for the speciality steel and pipes business units, and as they develop their plans for the strip products business. The Government’s offer of support via an equity stake and/or loans on commercial terms to a future owner of the strip products business. The Government’s plans for the strip products business. The Government’s offer of support via an equity stake and/or loans on commercial terms to a future owner of the strip products business, which includes the operations at Port Talbot, remains.

Separately, the Government continue to work with the wider steel sector to improve the business environment in the UK, with a focus on ensuring their competitiveness in the long term. The Steel Council met for the second time on 8 June to consider the recommendations of its working groups. The vast majority of these recommendations are reflected in the UK Steel manifesto which was published last week, which I welcome.

We are already taking forward many of these recommendations and the Council has agreed to develop a common vision for the future of the sector in the UK, which will provide clarity around what Government, the companies and the workforce must do to ensure the steel industry remains competitive and more sustainable in the future. My Department will shortly commission further research to assist the sector in the development of its vision. [HCWS79]

EDUCATION

Post-16 Skills Plan

The Minister for Skills (Nick Boles): As a country, one of the most important challenges we face is reforming the skills system. Such reform is crucial if we are to ensure our country’s future prosperity and improve the life chances of millions of people.

We have a critical need for highly skilled people, trained effectively, to grow the economy and raise productivity. Weaknesses in the UK’s skills base have contributed to its long-standing productivity gap with France, Germany and the US. While international comparisons highlight our strong performance at graduate and higher skills levels, we perform poorly at the intermediate, skilled technician level. Indeed the UK is forecast to fall from 22nd to 28th out of 33 OECD countries for these intermediate-level skills by 2020[6]. Following the vote to leave the European Union, it will become more important than ever that we have a highly skilled workforce that boosts the productivity of the country and allows us to trade competitively across the world.

There is also a compelling moral case for change. Skilled employment leads to prosperity and security for individuals, while unskilled employment often means the opposite. We need to give all young people and adults the opportunity to gain the skills, knowledge and behaviours needed for the world of work.

We made significant improvements to the skills system in the last Parliament. We grew investment in apprenticeships, for example, and removed from performance tables thousands of poor-quality qualifications, that offered little or no advantage in the jobs market, as a result of the Wolf Report[8]. But there are still serious issues which must be tackled. Technical education remains the poor relation of academic education, and there are key challenges we must overcome, including:

- standards and qualifications are not always set by employers; instead they are too often set by a confusing mixture of awarding organisations and intermediary bodies which have not provided an effective voice for business;
- the system is too complex and often difficult to navigate for both young people and adults looking to retrain; and
- we have too little dedicated technical education at advanced levels (levels 3, 4 and 5) to meet this country’s need for technician-level skills, and study programmes are not always designed to deliver what is needed to move to skilled employment.

On Friday 8 July I published, and laid before Parliament, a Post-16 Skills Plan. This is our ambitious framework to support young people and adults in England to secure a lifetime of sustained skilled employment and meet the needs of our growing and rapidly changing economy.

The Skills Plan builds directly on the recommendations of an independent panel on technical education. The panel was chaired by Lord Sainsbury of Turville and its members were: Baroness Wolf of Dulwich; Sir Roy Griffiths Professor of Public Sector Management at King’s College London; Bev Robinson, Principal and Chief Executive at Blackpool and The Fylde College;
Simon Blagden, Non-executive Chairman at Fujitsu UK; and Steven West, Vice-Chancellor and President at University of the West of England. The panel consulted widely, its deliberations were non-political and its conclusions are pragmatic. Its recommendations draw from international best practice and will place our system on a par with the best in the world.

Together, the Skills Plan and Sainsbury report set out a holistic strategy to tackle the current flaws with the skills system by:

- building on the apprenticeship ‘Trailblazer’ approach by putting employers at the heart of the system and empowering them to take the lead in setting the standards in technical education;
- ensuring that, alongside the already well-established academic option, this country has a high-quality technical option which aligns apprenticeships and college-based learning;
- building on the experience of other countries with successful skills systems by developing a new framework of 15 technical routes to skilled employment, with each route grouping together skilled occupations where training requirements are similar;
- developing a strong, dynamic, financially sustainable and locally responsive training provider base through area reviews and other reforms; and
- putting in place a wider set of systemic changes, including making more data available and reforming careers guidance to inform student choice, and ensuring we have the right funding and accountability arrangements in place.

The Skills Plan is our overarching framework, with a common set of principles and a guiding vision. I am confident that it can lead to lasting change. We will work closely with employers, colleges and other training providers to develop detailed plans, and publish more detail later in the year.

The Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. This statement has also been made in the House of Lords.

\[\text{UKCES (2014) UK Skill Levels and International Competitiveness, 2013 available online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-skills-levels-international-comparisons-and-competitiveness}\]

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): I am today publishing the reports of the three initial teacher training (ITT) expert groups which I commissioned last year, following a review of ITT carried out by Sir Andrew Carter OBE. Alongside these reports I am also publishing a Government response setting out how we intend to take forward the groups’ recommendations.

The review groups were tasked with developing a new framework of core content for ITT; behaviour management content for ITT; and a set of standards for school-based ITT mentors. The three groups were chaired by, respectively, Stephen Munday CBE, Tom Bennett, and the Teaching Schools Council (under the leadership of Vicki Beer CBE and, latterly, Dr Gary Holden).

Sir Andrew Carter’s report, published in January 2015, highlighted that the system in England is generally performing well, but that more needs to be done to ensure all trainee teachers receive a strong grounding in the basics of classroom management and subject knowledge development, as well as key areas of practice such as assessment and an increased understanding of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Sir Andrew also suggested that the quality of school-based ITT mentoring is not as good as it could be, and his report made a number of recommendations to both Government and the sector in this regard.

Good teachers are the single most important factor influencing pupils’ achievement in school. The Government are therefore committed to ensuring that the education system can recruit, train, develop and retain the best possible teachers in our schools. Key to this is to strengthen the quality and content of ITT programmes so that new teachers enter the classroom appropriately equipped in essential areas such as subject knowledge development and subject-specific pedagogy, practical behaviour management strategies, a sound understanding of SEND, and the ability to use the most up-to-date research on effective teaching practice.

The Government welcome the reports of the three expert groups as an important step towards realising our goals of further improving the quality of teacher training and raising the status of the teaching profession, while directly addressing the issues raised by the Carter review. Our recent White Paper, Educational Excellence Everywhere, published in March 2016, set out plans to develop a new set of quality criteria that will in future be applied when training places are being allocated to providers. We will therefore consider how best the new framework of content can be used to inform those criteria, with a view to ensuring that all providers who are allocated training places are clearly demonstrating the quality of content in their courses. Further detail of how we intend to apply the new criteria to the allocation of ITT places from 2017/18 onwards will be published shortly.

Tom Bennett’s report sets out some clear recommendations for the teacher training sector on how behaviour management should be delivered within ITT. An abridged version of his full recommendations has formed part of the new framework of core content for ITT. It is clear from the report that providers of ITT should ensure that trainees are able to access high-quality training before they are ready to enter the classroom; this is a recommendation with which we strongly agree, and we would encourage all providers to ensure that their programmes are structured accordingly.

Linked to high-quality training programmes is the critical role that school-based mentors should play in supporting teacher trainees to develop into effective teachers. This is particularly true as we continue to drive the move towards more school-led teacher training, as set out in the White Paper. The Teaching Schools Council, led firstly by Vicki Beer CBE and subsequently by Dr Gary Holden, has developed a set of standards that I believe can help to bring consistency to the practice of mentors, raise the profile of the mentoring role in school-led training, and contribute to building a culture of coaching and mentoring within the teaching profession. All of these are crucial if our next generation of outstanding teachers is to have the greatest possible impact on improving standards of teaching and allowing our children to reach their full potential.

I am placing copies of the reports from Stephen Munday CBE, Tom Bennett and Dr Gary Holden, along with the Government’s response to their recommendations, in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS83]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): The Armed Forces Covenant is the Government’s commitment to service personnel, their families and veterans who have made enormous sacrifices on recent operations and to ensuring that those seriously injured receive the care and support they deserve. I would like to update the House on some of the steps we have taken to enhance this provision.

The Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre (DMRC) at Headley Court has long provided world-class rehabilitation and prosthetic support to our serving personnel. I am pleased to tell the House that a number of veterans with amputation-related complications can now also receive prosthetic support at Headley Court, through the recent establishment of a veterans’ Complex Prosthetic Assessment Clinic (CPAC) at the DMRC. Access to the CPAC is being offered to veterans with the most complex needs on a case by case basis, after referral by and with the support of their NHS specialist. Early feedback has been good and the Government are working closely with BLESMA, the limbless charity, and other service charities to ensure veterans and NHS clinicians are aware of this initiative and its benefits.

A small number of those referred to the CPAC might also meet the clinical criteria for the direct skeletal fixation (DSF) pilot, for which the Government announced £2 million of LIBOR funding in November 2015. The DSF pilot, which is due to run for another two years, has already enabled some service personnel and veterans to have potentially life-changing surgery in this country at public expense.

I can also announce a plan to improve the care received by the most seriously injured service personnel and veterans. Currently such support is funded and delivered by a number of separate agencies, including the NHS, Ministry of Defence, local authorities and charitable organisations. A pilot, commencing in September will see care of this kind co-ordinated and delivered by a new Integrated High Dependency Care System (IHDCS), producing a joined-up and improved system of care for the individual. This will provide confidence for this small number of individuals, and their families, that their clinical, health and social support needs will continue to be met when they leave the armed forces and for the rest of their lives.

The Government and the nation will never forget the hard work, great bravery and sacrifice of all current and former service personnel and I will ensure the House is kept informed of this continuing and vital work.

[HCWS86]

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Offshore Energy Strategic Environmental Assessment

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): I am today announcing the outcome of the offshore energy strategic environmental assessment (OESEA3) regarding future offshore energy developments.

The Department has completed an offshore energy strategic environmental assessment (OESEA) of a draft plan/programme to enable further offshore licensing/leasing for oil and gas, gas storage including carbon dioxide transport and storage as part of carbon capture and storage (CCS), and offshore marine renewables including wind, wave and tidal energy.

The renewable energy elements of the draft plan/programme cover the relevant parts of the UK exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and the territorial waters of England and Wales; for hydrocarbon gas storage it applies to UK waters (territorial waters and the UK EEZ), and for carbon dioxide storage it applies to UK waters (the UK EEZ and territorial waters excluding territorial waters in Scotland) and for hydrocarbon exploration and production it applies to UK territorial sea and the UK continental shelf.

An eight-week public consultation on the OESEA3 environmental report closed on 29 April 2016. All comments received on the draft plan/programme and the environmental report have been considered by the Department and a post-consultation report for OESEA3 has been prepared and placed on the gov.uk website: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/offshore-energy-strategic-environmental-assessment-sea-an-overview-of-the-sea-process. This summarises stakeholder comments and the Department’s clarifications and responses to them. The environmental report and the comments received have informed the Department’s decision on whether to proceed with the draft plan/programme.

The Department has decided to adopt the draft plan/programme, with the area offered restricted spatially through the exclusion of certain areas together with a number of mitigation measures to prevent, reduce and offset significant adverse impacts on the environment and other users of the sea. On the basis of the evidence set out in the environmental report, which discussed the alternatives to the chosen approach, and the comments received during consultation, the Department concludes that there are no overriding environmental considerations that would prevent the achievement of our draft plan/programme of offshore marine renewables leasing (wind, wave and tidal technologies), offshore oil and gas licensing, and offshore gas storage and carbon dioxide storage leasing/licensing, provided appropriate measures are implemented that prevent, reduce and offset significant adverse impacts on the environment and other users of the sea. In all cases, the relevant competent authority should undertake any appropriate assessment(s) prior to awarding licences or leases, where screening shows this to be necessary. This meets the requirements of EU Council directive 2009/147/EC on “the conservation of wild birds” and Council directive 92/43/EEC on “the conservation of natural habitats and wild fauna and flora”, and UK implementing regulations. Although the UK has recently voted in favour of leaving the European Union, there will be no immediate changes in the way the UK undertakes its obligations under EU legislation. The adoption of the draft plan/programme demonstrates we are continuing to deliver on our energy and climate change agenda.

The environmental report sets out the environmental considerations relevant to the plan/programme in more detail and section 6.1 includes recommendations that take into account these environmental considerations.
The post-consultation report responds to comments made on a number of environmental considerations, which have also been taken into account.

The Department will monitor the significant environmental effects of the implementation of the plan/programme, as described in section 6.2 of the environmental report.

OESEA3 paves the way for the Oil and Gas Authority to make preparations for further rounds of offshore licensing for oil and gas and to consider future licence applications for gas storage and carbon dioxide storage to ensure that the UK continues to have a diverse, affordable and reliable mix of energy sources as we continue to move towards a low-carbon economy. The Oil and Gas Authority is currently an Executive agency of the Department, but it is expected to become a Government company later this year.

OESEA3 also paves the way for future leasing for offshore marine renewables, including wind, wave and tidal which will contribute to the UK renewable energy targets. The environmental report highlights that siting and consenting processes for offshore renewable energy developments must remain flexible to allow for technological innovation, including any mitigation measures.

**INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**GuarantCo: Callable Capital Agreement**

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Sir Desmond Swayne): It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Minister concerned to present a departmental minute to Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the statement, except in cases of special urgency.

I have today laid a departmental minute outlining details of the liability of up to £40 million which DFID has undertaken in respect of the Private Infrastructure Development Group (PIDG).

GuarantCo was established in 2003 as an investment facility of the PIDG. PIDG encourages and mobilises private investment in infrastructure in the frontier markets of sub-Saharan Africa and South and South-east Asia. PIDG makes it viable for private investors to participate in infrastructure deals, using limited sums from its publicly funded trust to crowd-in many times that value in private capital. The US $1.2 billion committed by PIDG donors since 2002 has leveraged over US $20 billion in private investment and a further US $9 billion in investment from partner international and development finance institutions.

PIDG supports private investment throughout the project development cycle from its earliest stages, through a number of separate facilities or companies. GuarantCo supports local currency lending for infrastructure projects in developing countries by providing guarantees to banks and bond investors. This helps to remove the risk of currency devaluation for investors and allows them to structure tailored financial instruments. In this way, it helps to promote domestic infrastructure financing and self-sustaining capital market development in low and lower-middle income countries.

GuarantCo’s business model requires it to demonstrate the capacity to issue guarantees for transactions it is discussing with counterparties. GuarantCo expects to only have a minimal number of defaulting projects. However, it needs to have a legally solid call on sufficient capital for it to pay out against called guarantees.

Currently DFID supports GuarantCo through paid-in capital. To ensure better value for money for UK taxpayer funding, however, DFID is proposing to enter into an agreement with GuarantCo for callable equity (capital). This will allow cash to remain with HM Government. It also responds to a key recommendation of the National Audit Office in its report “Oversight of the Private Infrastructure Development Group” (HC 265) in July 2014 to improve how DFID “critically reviews its funding of the activities of multilateral bodies such as PIDG, only releasing funds once there is a clear need for the money and the capacity to make good use of it. This will enable it to compare PIDG with other options and avoid large unused cash balances”.

GuarantCo will still be able to leverage its increased equity base as it will have a sovereign guarantee of callable capital. Consequently, it will be able to continue its development objectives and expand its pipeline of projects.

DFID’s total contingent liability for GuarantCo would be £40 million under this callable capital agreement. This is part of the overall approved budget for PIDG under its current business case. The sole purpose of this arrangement is to achieve better value for money for taxpayers by providing callable capital instead of cash while achieving the same development outcomes.

The agreement would be in place for 10 years and capital can be called by GuarantCo if the value of its guarantee portfolio is more than five times its equity. This would require GuarantCo to lose about 60% (or US $166 million) of its paid-in equity at a guarantee portfolio of US $1 billion. DFID considers the risk of this happening to be low but not negligible. Even if called towards the end of the agreement, it would still provide better value for money than DFID providing cash now. DFID will continue to review the financial performance with GuarantCo regularly and GuarantCo will be required to report quarterly on the risk of the capital being called. In the circumstance where the contingent liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

The Treasury has approved the proposal in principle. If, during the period of 14 parliamentary sitting days beginning on the date on which this minute was laid before Parliament (i.e. 13 to 21 July and 5 to 15 September), a Member signifies an objection by giving notice of a parliamentary question or by otherwise raising the matter in parliament, final approval to proceed with incurring the liability will be withheld pending an examination of the objection.

[HCWS84]

[HCWS85]
Written Statements

Thursday 14 July 2016

TREASURY

Ecofin

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council took place in Luxembourg on 17 June 2016. EU Finance Ministers discussed the following items:

Auto-tax avoidance directive
The Council reached political agreement to the auto-tax avoidance directive.

Financial transaction tax
A brief update was provided on the progress regarding implementing a financial transaction tax in participating member states. The UK is not taking part in the financial transaction tax.

Strengthening the banking union
Council conclusions were agreed on measures to strengthen the banking union.

Current legislative proposals
The presidency updated the Council on the state of play regarding a number of financial services dossiers.

State of play of the banking union
Belgium provided an update on its transposition of the bank resolution and recovery directive and the deposit guarantee scheme directive as the only remaining member state yet to complete this.

Analysis by the Commission on temporary VAT derogations (reverse charge mechanism)
The Commission agreed to bring forward a legislative proposal to allow certain member states to apply a generalised reversal of liability for VAT payments.

Implementation of the stability and growth pact
The Council endorsed decisions to close the excessive deficit procedures for Cyprus, Ireland and Slovenia.

Report of the European Court of Auditors on the excessive deficit procedure
The Council adopted conclusions on a report of the European Court of Auditors regarding the excessive deficit procedure. This item moved to an “A” point with no discussion.

Contribution to the European Council meeting on 28-29 June 2016
The Council prepared a number of items ahead of June European Council. Specifically, Ministers endorsed the 2016 country specific recommendations, part of the European semester process.

Following this, views were exchanged on a number of issues including economic and fiscal governance and the investment plan for Europe. The item on national productivity boards moved to an “A” point with no discussion.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): My noble friend, the Lords spokesman for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Lord Gardiner), represented the UK at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council on 27 and 28 June in Luxembourg.

Commissioner Hogan made a short presentation with an overview of the various agricultural commodity markets and summarised all the support measures already in place to support farmers. The commissioner urged those member states yet to declare their expenditure from the September package to make full use of it. The UK distributed its share of targeted aid in December 2015 to help producers with their immediate cash-flow. The commissioner concluded by confirming that he will bring forward a new package of measures at the July Council which was supported by a number of member states, most notably Germany, France and Poland.

The Chair of the Agricultural Markets Taskforce (AMT), Cees Veerman, presented the Council with an update on the proposals being prepared for autumn 2016. The AMT is focusing on helping producers manage price volatility by identifying new structural measures.

The presidency explained that its compromise text on sustainable management of external fishing fleets, now took account of member state requests to simplify the management systems and ensure consistency with the control regulation.

Commissioner Vella presented his policy orientation for the setting of fishing opportunities in 2017. He noted the good progress made in many seas and stocks, for example cod and plaice in the North Sea, but also the continuing problems in the Mediterranean. The UK argued that exceptions to reaching maximum sustainable yield targets would need to be made in some cases in order to avoid clashes with other objectives of the reformed common fisheries policy. Other MS, including the UK, pointed to the difficulties inherent in implementing the landing obligation, which will see an end to the wasteful practice of discarding of dead fish at sea.

Any other business items
The Commission updated the Council on the various initiatives which were tackling the serious state of the Mediterranean’s fish stocks.

Finland called on the Commission to resolve an issue connected with an oversight in the common provisions’ regulation.

Council conclusions for FLEGT were adopted.

The presidency announced the final report of the expert group on sustainable plant protection.

Commissioner Andriukaitis presented the recent Commission communication on endocrine disruptors.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Brussels.
Foreign Affairs Council

The agenda for the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) is expected to include Latin America, China, and external migration. Ms Mogherini is expected to raise in her introductory remarks a number of topics, including: climate diplomacy; security sector reform and capacity building for security and development; the quartet report on the middle east peace process; Afghanistan ministerial conference; and an EU external action service Iraq options paper. Ministers will have an informal discussion on the EU global strategy over lunch.

Latin America

On Cuba, discussions will focus on a new EU-Cuba political dialogue and co-operation agreement. Ministers will also discuss preparations for the EU-community of Latin America and Caribbean states (CELAC) ministerial summit, which will take place in the Dominican Republic in October. Council conclusions are expected on Venezuela.

China

The High Representative will update Ministers on the outcomes of the recent EU-China summit, which she attended in Beijing on 13 July with Presidents Tusk and Juncker. This was the first such meeting following the publication of the new EU-China strategy in June 2016.

Migration

Ministers will discuss the June European Council conclusions on the Commission communication on establishing a new partnership framework with third countries under the European agenda on migration. We remain committed to helping tackle irregular migration flows to Europe and support the broad thrust of the proposed partnerships-improving co-ordination between the activities of EU institutions and member states in targeted source and transit countries and making better use of all available tools. We also expect an exchange of views on priorities for the UNGA high-level event on large movements of migrants and refugees, which provides an opportunity for the international community to use of all available tools. We also expect an exchange of views on priorities for the UNGA high-level event on large movements of migrants and refugees, which provides an opportunity for the international community to build a sustainable global response to large population movements and the issue of irregular migration.

HEALTH

Infected Blood Payment Scheme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): On 21 January 2016 the Government launched their consultation on reform of the current ex-gratia payment schemes for individuals infected with HIV and/or hepatitis C following treatment with NHS-supplied blood or blood products before September 1991. They sought views particularly from the beneficiaries of the current schemes and their clinicians but the consultation was open to all to respond. The full analysis of the responses, the detail of the final decisions for the new scheme and an overview of the transition arrangements are set out in the Government’s formal consultation response published today.

The response is attached and can be found on the Department of Health’s website at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/infected-blood-reform-of-financial-and-other-support. The impact assessment and equalities impact assessment will be published on the same website before summer recess.

All infected individuals will now receive an annual payment. These annual payments will be linked to the consumer price index (CPI) and include the £500 winter fuel payments as a standard payment without the need to apply for it:

Those infected with hepatitis C at stage 1 will receive a new flat rate annual payment of £3,500 (rising to £4,500 from 2018-19) that is not linked to an individual assessment, as was proposed in the consultation—this will be the first time ongoing financial support will be provided for approximately 2,500 stage 1 beneficiaries.

Those with hepatitis C at stage 2 or those with HIV will see their annual payments increase to £15,500 (rising to £18,500 from 2018-19).

Those co-infected with HIV and hepatitis C at stage 1, will receive £18,500 (rising to £22,500 from 2018-19)

For those co-infected with HIV and hepatitis C at stage 2, will receive £30,500 (rising to £36,500 from 2018-19)

Discretionary support will not only continue but will be enhanced from 2018-19

A new special appeals mechanism for those at hepatitis C stage 1 who consider that the impact of their infection on their health may mean they could qualify for stage 2 payments will be introduced from 2017-18

Continuation of a £50,000 lump sum payment for those infected with hepatitis C stage 1 who progress to stage 2

In addition, partners/spouses at the time of death of a primary beneficiary will be entitled to a £10,000 one-off lump sum where the HIV/hepatitis C infection contributed to the death of their partner/spouse. This will apply to those already bereaved and newly bereaved.

All elements of the published reform package apply to the current spending review period of FY 2016-17 to FY 2020-21, during which a review of the scheme will
be undertaken. This review will particularly take account of the numbers being treated for Hepatitis C and the implications for the future operation of the scheme.

All payments will continue to be ex-gratia, which means they are funded voluntarily by Government. These payments will also be additional to any other income a person may receive, and are disregarded for the purposes of calculating income tax and eligibility for other state benefits.

Increased annual payments and new annual payments will take effect this year and be backdated to April 2016. Lump sum payments for bereaved spouses/partners will also be implemented this year. Arrangements for a single new scheme administrator will be progressed in the current financial year and become operational in 2017-18.

The proposals for scheme reform described in the consultation document are for beneficiaries infected in England. Information gathered through the consultation has been shared with the health departments in the devolved Administrations and we will continue to work closely with them.

The TPIM review group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice in force under regular and formal review. The TRG met on 22 and 23 March 2016 and 7 June 2016. The next TRG meetings will take place in September 2016.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): In March this year, Her Majesty the Queen gave Royal Assent to the Scotland Act 2016, marking an important milestone in fulfilling the UK Government’s commitment to make the Scottish Parliament one of the most powerful devolved parliaments in the world.

On 23 May, two months since Royal Assent, a number of important provisions in the Act came into force. These included new powers in relation to consumer advocacy and advice, gaming machines, equalities and transport, and marked an important milestone in the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government.

The Joint Ministerial Working Group on Welfare met in June to take forward discussions on commencement of the welfare sections of the Act. This was the first meeting of the group since the Scotland Act 2016 gained Royal Assent and since the new Scottish Parliament was elected. The UK and Scottish Governments both agreed an approach to commencing the welfare and employment support powers set out in the Act. This approach included bringing into force 11 welfare sections of the Scotland Act 2016.

I can today inform the House that, with the agreement of the Scottish Government, we will now commence the following sections of the Scotland Act 2016:

Section number: section title
24: Discretionary payments: top-ups of reserved benefits
25: Discretionary Housing Payments
26: Discretionary payments and assistance
28: Powers to create other new benefits;
29: Universal credit: costs of claimants who rent accommodation
30: Universal credit: persons to whom, and time when, paid
31: Employment support
32: Functions exercisable within devolved competence
33: Social Security Advisory Committee and Industrial Injuries Advisory Council
34: Information-sharing
35: Extension of unauthorised disclosure offence

Commencing these powers brings into force substantial new levers which will allow the Scottish Government to design a welfare system tailored to local needs, while maintaining our social union and the benefits of being part of the United Kingdom. For example, these regulations bring into force the power for the Scottish Parliament to create its own new benefits in any area of devolved responsibility.

The UK and Scottish Governments have been working together constructively to enable this and will continue to do so. We recognise the importance of ensuring the safe and secure transition of powers. Work is continuing on the remaining welfare sections of the Act and both Governments are committed to reaching an agreed approach on how they should be commenced. A further meeting of the Joint Ministerial Group on Welfare is expected to take place in the autumn.
I am pleased that the commencement regulations also include section 65 of the Scotland Act which enables Scottish Ministers to appoint a member to the Ofcom board. The section also requires Scottish Ministers to lay Ofcom’s annual report and accounts before the Scottish Parliament and underlines my commitment to implementing the Scotland Act 2016 and the Smith Commission agreement.

The commencement regulations I have made today represent another milestone in making the Scottish Parliament one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world.

[HCWS90]  

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE  

Electoral Registers  

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission: The Electoral Commission has today published the last in its series of reports on the transition to individual electoral registration (IER) in Great Britain. This final report presents the findings from its study on the accuracy and completeness of the registers published in December 2015, at the end of the transition. The report also makes clear the commission’s gratitude for the hard work done by parliamentarians, civil servants and, most significantly, electoral registration teams around the country to deliver this historic change to our electoral system.

The commission’s study on the last household registers from 2014 found both accuracy and completeness to be 86% for the parliamentary registers, and 87% and 85% respectively for the local government registers. The new study on the December 2015 registers shows that the parliamentary registers were 85% complete and 91% accurate, while the local government registers were 84% complete and 91% accurate.

This means that, during the transition to IER between 10 June 2014 and 1 December 2015, the overall accuracy of the registers increased by an estimated four percentage points, and that completeness, while broadly appearing to be stable, has seen a decline of just under one percentage point. The commission estimates that, in December 2015, between 7.6 and 8.3 million eligible people were not correctly registered to vote.

These findings suggest that most, but not all, of the entries removed at the end of the transition to IER in December 2015 were inaccurate, largely due to people moving home, although not all of the improvement in accuracy can be attributed to the removal of entries at the end of the transition.

Parliament chose to bring the end of the transition—and hence the deletion of these entries—forward from December 2016 to December 2015. At the time, the commission recommended that the end of the transition should not be brought forward as it had no data on which to judge the nature of the entries that would be removed. In the absence of data, it also believed there was a risk that removing the entries ahead of the planned May 2016 polls would put the onus on individual voters to need to re-register rather than on EROs to check the accuracy of these entries.

These accuracy and completeness findings suggest that there was no notable effect on the completeness of the registers from the removal of these entries and that the main impact is likely to have been the improvement in accuracy.

The commission has identified issues which need addressing. On the 1 December registers, there has been a decline in completeness among nearly all the younger age groups, including an approximate nine percentage point decrease for those aged 18 to 19. There have also been declines among other groups associated with a more mobile population such as those renting from a private landlord.

These estimates of accuracy and completeness are for December 2015, a “snapshot” in the lifecycle of the registers. Historically, the December registers, published at the end of the canvass, were at their most accurate and complete.

However, evidence indicates that, under IER, people are increasingly likely to register to vote in the run-up to an electoral event compared to at other points during the year. The size of the electorate was larger in May 2015 and in June 2016 than it was in December 2015. At the EU referendum, the commission announced that there were 46,500,001 entries on the registers compared to the 43,478,635 that were on the equivalent 1 December 2015 registers, an increase of nearly 5% between December and June. This and other evidence indicate the completeness of the registers was likely to be higher in May 2015 and May/June 2016, when high-turnout polls took place, than it was in December 2015.

The commission is clear that more work is needed to improve the system of electoral registration and to ensure that as many voters as possible are registered.

It has made a number of recommendations for improving the system and has called on the Government to both respond and then move on these quickly. These recommendations include that Government should explore how the online system can be upgraded so that people can check whether they are registered and also begin a programme of feasibility studies to examine in more detail how future systemic changes could be delivered, with pilots conducted to support this. The commission has suggested that initial priorities for this should include exploring options for the automatic registration of 16 and 17-year-olds and a focus on ways to ensure home movers are less likely to drop off the register. These should be the start of a co-ordinated strategy to move to a system of more automatic registration that could also eventually lead to “election day registration”.

The commission welcomes the work currently being undertaken to introduce online registration for electors in Northern Ireland.

The commission is aware that legislation for the current review of UK parliamentary constituencies has already been approved by Parliament. It has, however, invited the UK and Scottish Parliaments to consider whether it would be more appropriate in future to base constituency and boundary reviews on electorate data taken from the registers used for elections, instead of a snapshot of the electoral registers from December.

Copies of the commission’s report have been placed in the Library and it is also available on the commission’s website: www.electoralcommission.org.uk.
Written Statement

Monday 18 July 2016

PRIME MINISTER

Machinery of Government Changes

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This written statement sets out several machinery of Government changes that have been made.

A new Department for exiting the European Union has been created, with responsibility for overseeing preparations for the withdrawal of the UK from the EU and conducting these withdrawal negotiations in support of the Prime Minister. It will also lead work to establish the future relationship between the UK and EU. In doing this it will work very closely with the UK’s devolved administrations, the UK Parliament, other Government Departments and a wide range of other interested parties. The new Department will be formed by combining staff from the Cabinet Office’s Europe Unit, the Europe Directorate of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the UK’s permanent representation to the EU; and in time will take on staff from other Government Departments as is needed.

A new Department for International Trade has also been created, with overall responsibility for promoting British trade across the world. It will develop, co-ordinate and deliver a new trade policy for the UK, including preparing for and then negotiating free trade agreements and market access deals with non-EU countries. The new Department will be a specialised body with significant new trade negotiating capacity. It will take on the responsibilities of UK trade and investment, the relevant trade functions of the former Department for Business Innovation and Skills; and take on responsibility for UK export finance.

The functions of the former Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in respect of higher and further education policy, apprenticeships and skills have been transferred to the Department for Education. Bringing these responsibilities together in a single Department will mean that the Government can take a comprehensive, end-to-end view of skills and education, supporting people from early years through to postgraduate study and work.

The Department for Energy and Climate Change and the remaining functions of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills have been merged to form a new Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, bringing together responsibility for business, industrial strategy, and science and innovation with energy and climate change policy. The new Department will be responsible for helping to ensure that the economy grows strongly in all parts of the country, based on a robust industrial strategy. It will ensure that the UK has energy supplies that are reliable, affordable and clean; and it will make the most of the economic opportunities of new technologies, and support the UK’s global competitiveness more effectively.

More detailed Cabinet Office papers on each of these changes have been placed in the Library of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications.

[HCWS94]
Written Statement

Tuesday 19 July 2016

HOME DEPARTMENT

Community Sponsorship

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The refugee resettlement programme team is a tri-departmental team, based in the Home Office. This reflects the cross cutting nature of the resettlement programme. This written statement has been prepared by officials from the joint team and agreed by both myself and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.

The response of the British public to the refugee crisis resulting from the conflict in Syria has been one of overwhelming generosity, and many have been moved to make offers of assistance. At the Conservative party conference, the then Home Secretary said that we would build on offers of support to develop a community sponsorship scheme to allow individuals, charities, faith groups, churches and businesses to support refugees directly.

I am pleased to announce today details of how the Government will empower local communities to support the most vulnerable refugees through community sponsorship. This includes a “Help Refugees in the UK” digital register of offers from the public, and a scheme for full community sponsorship.

The “Help Refugees in the UK” register, hosted on the gov.uk website, will make it easier for the public to support vulnerable refugees in the UK. Local authorities will be able to identify the goods and services that they require to support refugees, individuals will then be able to submit their offers, and the system will channel them to the areas where they are going to be used. “Help Refugees in the UK” is being launched in nine pilot local authorities initially. They are Broxtowe, Cambridge, Cornwall, Coventry, Gateshead, Lambeth, City of Nottingham, Wiltshire, and City of York. Offers of help made by members of the public in all non-pilot areas will be considered centrally by the resettlement programme team before being passed on to local authorities.

In Scotland, offers of support will be directed to the “Scotland Welcomes Refugees” website through a link on the gov.uk website.

The full community sponsorship scheme will enable community groups to take on the challenging but rewarding role of welcoming and supporting a refugee family in the UK. Full community sponsorship will commence on a small scale, and the resettled families will be among those referred by the UNHCR under the Syrian resettlement and vulnerable children’s resettlement schemes.

Accordingly, a ministerial arrangement under paragraph 1(d) of schedule 23 to the Equality Act 2010 has been made to allow a community sponsorship scheme for vulnerable Syrians resettled in the UK. I am placing a copy of the arrangement for this concession in the Library of both Houses of Parliament.

Community sponsors will be responsible for supporting the resettled family from the moment of their arrival in the UK. This will include, for example, meeting the family at the airport, giving a warm welcome and explaining UK and local culture, providing housing, helping them register with medical and social services, arranging English language tuition, and supporting them towards employment and self-sufficiency.

Supporting a vulnerable resettled family is a significant responsibility. The Home Office will approve every sponsoring organisation. The approval process will ensure that each prospective sponsor has sufficient resources—housing, financial and personnel; has a credible plan for supporting a resettled family, backed by relevant experience; and does not present a risk to the resettled family.

In order to develop the scheme, the Government have been working with a number of prospective sponsors and local authorities. Lambeth Palace are the first community group to be approved and receive a Syrian family.

Guidance on how to become a community sponsor will be published on the gov.uk website today. This is an exciting and ground-breaking new development for resettlement in the UK. I hope that this new approach will help bring communities together and support these often traumatised and vulnerable families as they rebuild their lives, and contribute to and thrive in our country.

[HCWS95]
Written Statement

Wednesday 20 July 2016

WORK AND PENSIONS

Welfare Reform

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): Universal credit is the biggest transformation of the welfare state since its inception; it has formed and will continue to form a key part of this Government’s action to reduce reliance on benefits and increase incentives to work. It is a reform which is fundamentally about helping people to build better futures for themselves and their families.

Universal credit has been successfully rolled out across the country to new single jobseekers and is now available in all jobcentres. Over a quarter of a million people are now receiving universal credit, with around 12,500 new claims every week.

It is essential that the universal credit roll-out for all claimant types is delivered in an orderly and successful manner; that claimants receive the support they need in a timely fashion; and that welfare reforms are delivered safely as the roll-out continues. The previous Government altered the universal credit roll-out schedule to make sure that the delivery continues to be safe and controlled. I believe this was the right decision: this new Government are committed to administer the universal credit programme in a careful, reliable and transparent fashion.

First, it is important to deliver the policy to limit the child element of tax credits and universal credit to two children to its planned April 2017 timetable. Therefore, we will direct new claims from families with more than two children to tax credits until November 2018. Thereafter, new claims from families with more than two children will be taken through universal credit. Families already on universal credit who have a third child after April 2017 will remain on universal credit and receive two child elements.

Secondly, the policy to remove the higher rate of child element for the first child in universal credit will apply only where the first child is born after 6 April 2017, aligning the treatment of families within universal credit to that in tax credits.

Thirdly, the incorporation of housing benefit for pensioners into pension credit will not begin until the completion of the universal credit timetable, in order to give greater certainty to local authorities. In addition, the regulations on treatment of surplus earnings and self-employed losses will now be implemented from April 2018.

The Government are making provision for the additional work to deliver these reforms and the other changes announced in summer budget 2015 by reshaping the next phase of universal credit roll-out. The Department will continue its successful roll-out of five jobcentres a month to June 2017, expanding to 30 in July 2017. Following a break over the summer the Department will scale up to 55 jobcentres per month between October and December 2017. From February 2018 this will increase to 65 per month, finishing with the final 57 jobcentres in September 2018.

The Government have also taken account of the comments by the NAO and PAC that the existing roll-out plan contains no contingency, and the risks to delivery that brings. For the first time since universal credit was announced in 2010, we will put specific contingency into the plan from September 2018 until June 2019. The managed migration of existing benefit claims will start in July 2019 and complete in March 2022.

Finally, in line with the Department’s commitment to its delivery partners to give at least six months’ notice of universal credit implementation plans in their areas, I can today announce the sites for the remainder of 2016-17. Following a planned break in January 2017, universal credit will be rolled out to Corby, Southampton, Newcastle East, Warrington and Poplar in February 2017. Following this, in March 2017, universal credit will be rolled out to Hinckley, Dalkeith, Newcastle West, Penicuik and City Tower.

In addition the Scottish sites rolling out in November 2016 are changing from Fort William, Invergordon, Portree, Wick and Dingwall to Port Glasgow, Greenock and Kirkintilloch.

I believe this plan is the best way to ensure secure delivery of the Government’s welfare reform priorities, increasing employment outcomes and supporting claimants at an affordable cost for the taxpayer.

[HCWS96]
Written Statements

Thursday 21 July 2016

DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Informal Competitiveness Council

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): My noble Friend the Minister of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Baroness Neville-Rolfe) has today made the following statement:

The Informal Competitiveness Council, chaired by the Slovak presidency, took place in Bratislava on 18-19 July 2016. Baroness Neville-Rolfe represented the UK on day one (internal market and industry) with David Wilson, Deputy Director, International Knowledge and Innovation Directorate, on day two (research). There were major contributions from Gunther Oettinger, Commissioner for the Digital Economy and Society on the digital economy, and by Peter Ziga, the Slovak Economy Minister on the priorities of the Slovak presidency, including the Digital Single Market and principles of better regulation. In a break out session on digital skills, the UK highlighted the importance of working on digital skills in schools, in the workplace and in society, and of bridging the gap on expert skills. The UK confirmed that it would continue to play a full and constructive role in the Council while it remained a member of the EU.

On the second day, member states supported the general principles of the declaration to support young researchers. The UK underlined the value of increased co-operation, but also the need to respect the autonomy of national education systems. Collaboration and regulatory simplification were among the issues that were strongly supported in creating an ecosystem to support innovative SMEs. The UK joined a number of member states in emphasising the importance of further simplification of support programmes and following up on existing commitment to create a more innovation friendly environment.

CABINET OFFICE

Conflict Stability and Security Fund

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer): I wish to update the House on how the Government have been supporting our national security interests through conflict prevention, peace building, stabilisation, peacekeeping and conflict resolution using the conflict stability and security fund (CSSF).

The CSSF replaced the conflict pool in April 2015, as part of a new, more strategic approach to enhancing the delivery of our national security interests. The CSSF is one of two funding instruments overseen by the National Security Adviser. My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury will be providing a parallel update to Parliament today on the prosperity fund, which operates on a similar cross-Government basis.

Last year the Government laid a statement before the House announcing the creation of the CSSF. As announced last November in the strategic defence and security review (SDSR), for the current financial year CSSF funding has increased to £1.127 billion and it will increase by a further 19% over this spending review period, reaching £1.322 billion a year by 2019. The CSSF is now one of the world’s largest mechanisms for addressing conflict and instability. Its programmes deliver against over 40 cross-Government strategies set by the National Security Council. Together, these activities help to secure the UK, promote peace and stability overseas and contribute directly to the SDSR’s objectives. The CSSF is designed as a flexible resource. It is supporting the peace processes including that in Colombia, tackling organised crime in the Caribbean, helping Ukraine to build its resilience to withstand external threats, funding a doubling of British UN peacekeepers, and has supported reforming the police and militaries in some of the world’s most challenging environments. Without the CSSF, the UK and our international partners would be less secure.

Parliamentary accountability for taxpayers’ money spent via the CSSF is provided primarily through the Joint Committee for the National Security Strategy. Each autumn, the NSC agrees overall annual allocations for the CSSF, though these may change during the year in response to crises. The NSC reviews strategies in the spring. Regional boards on which all NSC departments are represented are responsible for overseeing delivery of programmes against these strategies. A joint unit—the NSS joint programme hub—provides the secretariat, advises the NSC on funding and delivery against the strategies, and advises the regional boards and programme teams on financial management and monitoring and evaluation.

The Government have used the CSSF to mitigate the spill-over of the Syrian conflict into Jordan and Lebanon. We have supported Jordan’s security agencies to maintain its stability in the context of an influx of refugees equivalent to 10% of its population. We have also established community police stations in Syrian refugee camps and trained Jordanian community police. This programme—funded initially by the conflict pool and now the CSSF—has had a tangible impact: security incidents in the camps dropped by two-thirds between 2013 and 2014. We continue to assist the Lebanese military in securing their border with Syria to prevent Daesh’s attempts to infiltrate Lebanon. We have trained 5,782 troops and enabled Lebanon to secure 75% of the border. In Africa we are helping to tackle terrorist groups, including training the Africa Union peacekeepers in Somalia and capacity-building for the Somali military. We have also ensured women’s participation in building Somalia’s future through its state-building processes. In Nigeria we have used CSSF funds to work with the Nigerian armed forces in tackling Boko Haram.

The Government are using CSSF funds to promote a political process and save lives in Syria. This includes training and equipping over 2,700 volunteers across northern Syria to carry out search and rescue, fire-fighting and first aid. These “White Helmets” have saved over 50,000 lives since March 2013.

Gender equality is embedded throughout the delivery of the CSSF. Last year the CSSF spent £26 million explicitly on activities addressing gender equality and a further £159 million on programmes with elements which addressed gender equality.
CSSF funding is strengthening the multilateral system, supporting the UN and other international organisations, to develop more effective multilateral responses to instability. The CSSF funds our contributions to the UN peacekeeping budget. We are the sixth biggest contributor, spending over £300 million in 2015. We are also using CSSF funds to help reform the UN and UN peacekeeping, coordinating outreach to member states to secure pledges of personnel for peace operations and to assist with the transition from pledges to deployments.

The SDSR announced that the CSSF will incorporate additional programmes from 2016-17. These include the good governance fund for the eastern neighbourhood and western Balkans, the north Africa good governance fund, a migration fund and a programme for the overseas territories.

Conflicts Stability and Security Fund resources, FY16-17

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<tr>
<td>Peacekeeping and multilateral</td>
<td>385.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional/country strategies</td>
<td>577.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Security and defence</td>
<td>150</td>
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<tr>
<td>Delivery support, including the stabilisation unit</td>
<td>13.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>and National School of Government International</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,127</td>
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</table>

Attachments can be viewed online at http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statements/Commons/2016-07-21/HCWS123

The Government believe that the public should expect that all those with whom they interact, within the sphere of public services, have the language abilities required to respond to their needs.

A clear commitment in our manifesto was to ensure that all public sector workers in customer-facing roles can speak fluent English. I am delighted to announce that this manifesto commitment has now been fulfilled, with the Immigration Act 2016 receiving Royal Assent on 12 May 2016.

Part 7 of the Immigration Act 2016 places a duty on all public authorities in scope to ensure that their customer-facing staff can speak fluent English, or in Wales fluent English or Welsh. This will assure citizens that there is not a language barrier that might prevent them from contacting or using public services or inadvertently put them at risk.

It is a clear priority for the Government to ensure public services are delivered to a high standard in spoken English, or in Wales in English or Welsh.

In support of this aim, the Government are today publishing:

- A draft statutory code of practice which is intended to support public sector employers in complying with this new duty, while ensuring minimal burden. It provides principles and examples for public authorities to consider when fulfilling their legal duties and obligations. It will also be available in Welsh.

A final impact assessment is available, which evaluates the impact of this duty. It details the problem under consideration, the rationale for intervention and the policy objective. It also evaluates the monetised and non-monetised costs and benefits of the preferred option, as well as considering risks and possible wider impacts of the policy.

The Government have worked with relevant employers throughout the development of the draft code of practice and will continue to do so to ensure that the duty is implemented in a way which ensures a positive impact for employees and service users in frontline organisations.

The code will be laid before Parliament and issued in October but the early publication of the document is intended to support organisations to be ready to adhere to the statutory duty once it comes into force.

All publications will be available at: www.gov.uk and at: www.parliament.uk/...written-statements.

English Language Requirement

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer): I am today publishing a report on the performance of Departments and Agencies on handling correspondence from Members and Peers during the calendar year 2015. Details are set out in the table. Correspondence statistics for 2014 can be found on 3 June 2015, Official Report, column 15WS.

Departmental figures are based on substantive replies unless otherwise indicated. The footnotes to the table provide general background information on how the figures have been compiled.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statements/Commons/2016-07-21/HCWS118

The Prosperity Fund is a key part of our aid strategy. Using primarily Official Development Assistance (ODA) resources the fund will promote economic reform in developing countries contributing to a reduction in poverty.

The fund supports global and UK prosperity by removing barriers to trade, building prosperity partnerships, and supporting UK business in seizing new opportunities. It enables the UK to deepen relationships in countries across the globe.
Thematic, country and regional priorities for the Prosperity Fund are determined by a careful design and economic diagnosis process. Project design, management and evaluation ensures a strong focus on results and value for money. The fund is investing in areas with the highest potential for inclusive growth, strengthening the golden thread of robust institutions, good governance and reduced corruption.

The fund is accountable to the National Security Council (NSC) and to a ministerial board made up of relevant UK Government Departments. The fund supports a fully joined-up approach to prosperity delivery across Departments and through the Government’s overseas network.

All ODA projects and programmes under the Prosperity Fund comply with the International Development Act, meet the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) ODA criteria, are untied, and meet the UK Government transparency commitments on ODA spend.

The Prosperity Fund is one of two cross-Government funding instruments overseen by the National Security Advisor, Sir Mark Lyall Grant. An update to Parliament on the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) will be provided in parallel.

[HCWS104]

**ECOFIN**

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke):** I attended this meeting in my capacity as the Financial Secretary to the Treasury. A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council was held in Brussels on 12 July 2016. EU Finance Ministers discussed the following items:

*Anti-money laundering*

The Commission presented its proposals to amend parts of the fourth anti-money laundering directive (4AMLD), on the prevention of the use of the financial system for the purposes of money laundering or terrorist financing, followed by an exchange of views.

*Communication on further measures to enhance transparency and the fight against tax evasion and avoidance*

ECOFIN heard a presentation from the Commission on further measures to enhance transparency and the fight against tax evasion and avoidance. This was followed by an exchange of views.

*Presentation of the work programme of the Slovak presidency*

The presidency presented its work programme, this was followed by an exchange of views.

*Implementation of the banking union*

The Commission gave an update on the transposition of several dossiers linked to the banking union: the single resolution fund, the bank recovery and resolution directive and the deposit guarantee scheme directive.

*European semester-country-specific recommendations*

The Council adopted the 2016 country-specific recommendations as part of the European semester process.

*Implementation of the stability and growth pact*

The Council endorsed the draft decisions regarding the performance of Spain and Portugal under the excessive deficit procedure (EDP), based on recommendations by the Commission. The Council agreed with the Commission’s recommendation that Spain and Portugal have not taken effective action against their current targets. As these decisions cover euro area member states, the UK did not have a vote.

*Third pillar of the investment plan for Europe—thematic discussions on investment barriers*

The Commission presented on the third pillar investment plan, this was followed by an exchange of views.

*Preparation of the G20 Finance Ministers meeting in Chengdu on 23-24 July 2016*

The EU Terms of Reference (ToR) were presented to ECOFIN Finance Ministers for endorsement.

*Convergence reports from the Commission and the European Central Bank*

There was an exchange of views on the convergence reports which concluded that none of the seven EU member states who are obligated to join the euro fulfil the conditions for adopting the euro.

*State of play on finalising the Basel Committee’s post-crisis banking reform agenda*

Council conclusions were adopted on the Basel Committee’s post-crisis banking reform agenda.

[HCWS102]

**CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT**

**First World War Centenary Cathedral Repairs Fund**

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley):** I am today publishing the list of successful bidders to the First World War Centenary Cathedral repairs fund.

Cathedrals are powerful symbols of Britain’s shared history and are important not only for their architecture, history and religious learning but also as a place for local communities to come together. This fund is helping to ensure that they are in a good state of repair and preserved for future generations.

Decisions on funding allocations are taken by an expert panel, which considers the grant applications against the published criteria for the scheme and decides which cathedrals should receive funding. The panel is chaired by Sir Paul Ruddock and includes senior figures from English Heritage, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Church of England and the Catholic Church, as well as church architects, architectural historians and grant giving experts.

I am pleased to confirm that the panel has today decided to allocate funding of almost £14.5 million to 39 cathedrals. These are as follows:

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The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): I am pleased to announce that I have continue to serve as members of the Armed Forces’ Pay Review Body, for a further three-year term of office commencing on 1 March 2017. This appointment has been conducted in accordance with the guidance of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

[HCWS109]

Reserve Forces and Cadets Association

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): I have today placed in the Library of the House a copy of a report into the condition of the reserves and delivery of the Future Reserves 2020 programme compiled by the reserve forces’ and cadets’ association external scrutiny team. This is the second report to be published under the statutory obligation imposed by the Defence Reform Act 2014.

I am most grateful for the work of Lieutenant General Brims and the other members of the team. I will take some short time to consider the report’s findings and recommendations and will provide a full response to the team in due course.

[HCWS107]

EDUCATION

Higher Education Student Finance

The Minister for Universities and Science (Joseph Johnson): I am today announcing student finance arrangements for higher education students undertaking a course of study in the 2017-18 academic year beginning in August 2017.

Teaching excellence framework

As stated in the Government’s White Paper “Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice”, published on 16 May 2016, from 2016-17 the Government are introducing a teaching excellence framework (TEF) to provide clear information to students about where the best provision can be found and to drive up the standard of teaching in all higher education providers.

In year one of TEF (2016-17), all higher education providers who have met the eligibility criteria set out in the Government’s White Paper will receive a rating of Meets Expectations in TEF year one (2016-17). This TEF award will carry financial incentives, as detailed below, for 2017-18 which will last for one year only. A provisional list of providers achieving this rating in year one was published on 7 July 2016 on gov.uk.

The following sections provide details on the maximum tuition fee and fee loan caps in 2017-18 for higher education courses at providers that have been awarded a rating of Meets Expectations in TEF year one (2016-17).

Tuition fees and fee loans for full-time higher education courses

For all new students and eligible continuing students who started their full-time courses on or after 1 September 2012 and are undertaking courses at publicly funded higher education providers that have achieved a TEF rating of Meets Expectations, maximum tuition fee
caps will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) in 2017-18. For publicly funded providers that have achieved a TEF rating of Meets Expectations and have an access agreement with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), the maximum tuition fee cap for full-time courses will be £9,250 in 2017-18. For publicly funded providers that have not achieved a TEF rating of Meets Expectations, the maximum tuition fee cap for full-time courses in 2017-18 will be £6,165 in 2017-18.

Maximum fee loans for all new students and eligible continuing students who started their full-time courses at publicly funded providers on or after 1 September 2012 will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) to £9,250.

Maximum tuition fee and fee loan caps for students undertaking a work placement year of a sandwich course either in the UK or abroad will remain at 20% of the maximum applicable full-time fee and fee loan caps in 2017-18. Maximum tuition fee and fee loan caps for students undertaking an Erasmus study or work placement year or a period of study at an overseas provider that is not an Erasmus year will remain at 15% of the maximum applicable full-time fee and fee loans in 2017-18.

For continuing students who started their full-time courses before September 2012, maximum tuition fee and fee loan caps at publicly funded providers in 2017-18 will be £3,465, the same as in 2016-17.

Tuition fees and fee loans for part-time higher education courses

For all new students and eligible continuing students who started their part-time courses on or after 1 September 2012 and are undertaking courses at publicly funded providers that have achieved a TEF rating of Meets Expectations, maximum tuition fee caps will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) in 2017-18. For publicly funded providers that have not achieved a TEF rating of Meets Expectations, maximum tuition fee caps for full-time courses in 2017-18 will be £9,000 and £6,000, the same as in 2016-17.

Maximum fee loans for all new students and eligible continuing students who started their full-time courses at publicly funded providers on or after 1 September 2012 will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) to £9,250.

For private providers that have not achieved a TEF rating of Meets Expectations, the maximum fee loan for full-time courses will be £6,000, the same as in 2016-17.

For all new students and eligible continuing students who started their part-time courses on or after 1 September 2012 and are undertaking courses at private providers that have achieved a rating of Meets Expectations, the maximum fee loan will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) to £4,625 in 2017-18. For private providers that have not achieved a TEF rating of Meets Expectations, the maximum fee loan for part-time courses in 2017-18 will be £4,500, the same as in 2016-17.

Loans for living costs for new full-time students and continuing full-time students starting their courses on or after 1 August 2016

Maximum loans for living costs for new full-time students and eligible continuing full-time students starting their courses on or after 1 August 2016 will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) in 2017-18.

For students living away from home and studying outside London, the maximum loan for living costs for 2017-18 will be £8,430. I can confirm that the equivalent loan rates for students living away from home and studying in London will be £11,002; for those living in the parental home during their studies, £7,097; and for those studying overseas as part of their UK course, £9,654.

Loans for living costs for new full-time students and continuing full-time students starting their courses on or after 1 August 2016 who are entitled to certain benefits

Maximum loans for living costs for new full-time students and eligible continuing full-time students starting their courses on or after 1 August 2016 and who are entitled to benefits will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) in 2017-18.

For students who are entitled to benefits who are living away from home and studying outside London, the maximum loan for living costs for 2017-18 will be £9,609. I can confirm that the equivalent loan rates for students who qualify for benefits who are living away from home and studying in London will be £11,998; for those living in the parental home during their studies, £8,372; and for those studying overseas as part of their UK course, £10,746.

Loans for living costs for new full-time students and continuing full-time students starting their courses on or after 1 August 2016 who are age 60 or over at the start of their course

The maximum loan for living costs in 2017-18 for new full-time students and eligible continuing full-time students starting their courses on or after 1 August 2016 who are age 60 or over on the first day of the first academic year of their course, will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) to £3,566.

Maintenance grants and special support grants for full-time students who started their courses before 1 August 2016

The maximum maintenance grant and special support grant for full-time students who started their courses on or before 1 September 2012 will be £10,000 in 2017-18. For students who started their courses before 1 September 2012 and are studying at publicly funded providers that have not achieved a TEF rating of Meets Expectations but do not have an access agreement with OFFA, the maximum loan for living costs will be £11,002 in 2017-18. For private providers that have not achieved a TEF rating of Meets Expectations, the maximum loan for living costs will be £8,700 in 2017-18.
The maximum maintenance grant and special support grant for eligible continuing full-time students who started their courses before 1 September 2012, will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) in 2017-18 to £3,197.

Loans for full-time students

The maximum long courses (living costs) loans for eligible students who started their courses before 1 September 2012 and are living away from home and studying outside London, the maximum loan for living costs will be £6,440. I can confirm that the equivalent loan rates for students living away from home and studying in London will be £7,611; for those living in the parental home during their studies, £4,217; and for those studying overseas as part of their UK course, £6,475.

Long courses loans

The maximum long courses (living costs) loans for new and continuing students who are attending full-time courses that are longer than 30 weeks and three days during the academic year will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) in 2017-18.

Dependants’ grants

Maximum amounts for dependants’ grants (adult dependants’ grant, childcare grant and parents’ learning allowance) will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) in 2017-18 for all new and continuing full-time students.

The maximum adult dependants’ grant payable in 2017-18 will be increased to £2,834. The maximum childcare grant payable in 2017-18, which covers 85% of actual childcare costs up to a specified limit, will be increased to £159.59 per week for one child only and £273.60 per week for two or more children. The maximum parents’ learning allowance payable in 2017-18 will be increased to £1,617.

Part-time grants and loans

For those students who started part-time and full-time distance learning courses before 1 September 2012 and who are continuing their courses in 2017-18, maximum fee and course grants will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) in 2017-18. Maximum fee grants will be increased to £879, £1,054 or £1,321, depending on the intensity of study of the course. Maximum course grants will be increased to £288.

Disabled Students’ Allowance

Maximum grants for full-time and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate students with disabilities will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) in 2017-18.

Student support for part-time students starting a second degree course in STEM subjects

Most students who hold a higher education qualification are currently not entitled to apply for additional fee loan for a second course if that course leads to a qualification that is equivalent or lower in level (ELQ) than their previous higher education qualification.

The Government have previously relaxed ELQ rules in order to help people who already hold an honours degree qualification but who wish to retrain in some science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects. Students studying second degree courses on a part-time basis can already apply for fee loans for part-time second degree courses in engineering, technology or computer science.

I can confirm today that ELQ rules are being further relaxed to allow students wishing to start a second honours degree course on a part-time basis from 1 August 2017 onwards to apply for fee loans towards degree courses in the following additional STEM subjects: subjects allied to medicine; biological sciences; veterinary sciences, agriculture and related subjects; physical sciences and mathematical sciences.

Student support for new students starting courses in nursing, midwifery and the allied health professions on or after 1 August 2017

I can confirm today that from 1 August 2017, all new undergraduate nursing, midwifery and allied health professional students on pre-registration courses will receive support for fee loans and living costs through the standard student support system, rather than through course fees and NHS bursaries for living costs paid by Health Education England (HEE). These students will therefore be subject to the same general student finance arrangements that apply to other undergraduate students in 2017-18.

I can also confirm today that students already holding an honours degree who want to start a second honours degree course in nursing, midwifery and the allied health professions from 1 August 2017 onwards will be able to apply for fee loans and living costs support for their course.

Further details on the undergraduate student package and support arrangements for postgraduate pre-registration nursing, midwifery and allied health professional students from 1 August 2017 onwards will be set out in the Government’s consultation response which is being published in due course.

These changes will enable universities to provide up to 10,000 additional nursing, midwifery and allied health training places by 2020, giving more applicants the opportunity to become a health professional.

Student support for armed forces personnel serving overseas and their families

Students who are undertaking a full-time or part-time distance learning course with a UK provider qualify for loans, and where applicable, disabled students’ allowance if they were undertaking their courses in England on the first day of the first academic year of their course and are living in the UK. Students do not qualify for support for a distance learning course if they are undertaking their course outside the UK. This rule currently places armed forces personnel serving overseas
and their families who wish to undertake a higher education course by distance learning at a disadvantage as a result of their service.

I can confirm today that from 1 August 2017, UK armed forces personnel serving overseas, and family members living with them, will for the first time qualify for fee loans for full-time and part-time undergraduate distance learning courses with UK providers. They will also qualify for postgraduate masters loans for full-time and part-time masters degree distance learning courses with UK providers. Those students with disabilities will qualify for disabled students' allowance. This change will apply to students starting or continuing distance learning courses in 2017-18.

I expect to lay regulations implementing changes to student finance for undergraduates and postgraduates for 2017-18 later this year which will be subject to parliamentary scrutiny. More details of the 2017-18 fees will apply to students starting or continuing distance learning courses in 2017-18.

In that context, I am confirming that in 2017-18 no local authority will see a reduction from their 2016-17 funding (adjusted to reflect authorities’ most recent spending patterns) on the schools block of the dedicated schools grant (per pupil funding) or the high needs block (cash amount). As usual, we will apply an uplift for high needs later in the year. I am also publishing today detailed funding tables so that authorities can see exactly how this funding has been calculated.

Final allocations for schools and high needs blocks will follow in December on the basis of pupil numbers recorded in the October census. I am setting this out now so that local authorities can begin the process of setting the budgets of schools in their area and that this can be concluded in time for the start of the coming financial year. I am also confirming that, for 2017-18, we will retain the current minimum funding guarantee for schools, so that no school can face a funding reduction of more than 1.5% per pupil next year in what it receives through the local authority funding formula. To ensure that local authorities can start planning their budgets for next year with certainty, I do not intend to proceed, for 2017-18, with proposals to create a new central schools block, allow local flexibility on the minimum funding guarantee or to ring-fence the schools block within the dedicated schools grant. These will be covered, for 2018-19 and beyond, in my response to the first stage consultation in the autumn.

I will shortly publish the Education Funding Agency’s operational guide to schools funding in 2017-18, and send the draft Authority Proforma Tool to authorities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): The Government are firmly committed to introducing fairer funding for schools, high needs and early years. This is an important reform, which will fairly and transparently allocate funding on the basis of schools’ and children’s actual needs, rather than simply on historic local information. Along with the record levels of funding for schools announced at the spending review, and our commitment to the pupil premium for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, a fairer funding system will set a common foundation that will enable schools—no longer held back by a funding system that is arbitrary, out of date and unfair—to maximise the potential of every child. It will provide a crucial underpinning for the education system to act as a motor for social mobility and social justice.

The first stage consultations on national funding formulae for schools and high needs, which were published in March, have been met with an overwhelmingly positive response from headteachers, teachers, governors and parents.

There is also a strong sense in the response to the first stage of the consultation that this is a once in a generation opportunity for an historic change and that we must get our approach right. I will therefore publish the Government’s full response to the first stage of the schools and high needs consultations and set out my proposals for the second stage once Parliament returns in the autumn. We will run a full consultation, and make final decisions early in the new year. Given the importance of consulting widely and fully with the sector and getting implementation right, the new system will apply from 2018-19. I will set out our full plans for a national funding formula for early years shortly.

In the meantime, I understand the need for local authorities to have sufficient information to begin to plan their schools and high needs funding arrangements for 2017 to 2018. Many of those who responded to the first stage national funding formula consultations emphasised that schools and local authorities need stability, and where there are changes need early notice, as well as a fair system.

In that context, I am confirming that in 2017-18 no local authority will see a reduction from their 2016-17 funding (adjusted to reflect authorities’ most recent spending patterns) on the schools block of the dedicated schools grant (per pupil funding) or the high needs block (cash amount). As usual, we will apply an uplift for high needs later in the year. I am also publishing today detailed funding tables so that authorities can see exactly how this funding has been calculated.

Final allocations for schools and high needs blocks will follow in December on the basis of pupil numbers recorded in the October census.

I am setting this out now so that local authorities can begin the process of setting the budgets of schools in their area and that this can be concluded in time for the start of the coming financial year.

I am also confirming that, for 2017-18, we will retain the current minimum funding guarantee for schools, so that no school can face a funding reduction of more than 1.5% per pupil next year in what it receives through the local authority funding formula. To ensure that local authorities can start planning their budgets for next year with certainty, I do not intend to proceed, for 2017-18, with proposals to create a new central schools block, allow local flexibility on the minimum funding guarantee or to ring-fence the schools block within the dedicated schools grant. These will be covered, for 2018-19 and beyond, in my response to the first stage consultation in the autumn.

I will shortly publish the Education Funding Agency’s operational guide to schools funding in 2017-18, and send the draft Authority Proforma Tool to authorities.
of the devolved Administrations who are currently considering next steps. The contents of the NOS database will remain publicly available and employers throughout the UK can continue to use NOS if they so choose although they are not a mandatory requirement in England for either qualifications or apprenticeships.

The management of the employer skills survey, the employer perspectives survey and the LMI (labour market information) for All Portal will be moved into the Department for Education. The Investors in People function will continue and the Government are looking at arrangements to secure its future and growth.

All operational activities of UKCES will be concluded by the end of 2016 and it is expected the organisation will be wound up in line with the end of its financial year, 2016-17.

[HCWS121]

DEPARTMENT FOR EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

UK Presidency of the Council of the European Union

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): The UK had been scheduled to host the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2017. On 19 July the Prime Minister confirmed to President of the European Council Donald Tusk that the UK would be relinquishing the presidency of the Council of the European Union, noting that we would be prioritising the negotiations to leave the EU.

President Tusk welcomed the Prime Minister's swift decision which would allow the Council to put alternative arrangements in place. The Council secretariat will now put in motion the arrangements to allocate the presidency to an alternative member state.

The Prime Minister and President Tusk concluded by looking forward to a strong working relationship.

Attachments can be viewed online at http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-07-21/HCWS119/

[HCWS119]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Diplomatic Immunity

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): In 2015, 11 serious and significant offences allegedly committed by people entitled to diplomatic immunity in the United Kingdom were drawn to the attention of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office by parliamentary and diplomatic protection of the Metropolitan police, or other law enforcement agencies. Six of these were driving-related. We define serious offences as those which could, in certain circumstances, carry a penalty of 12 months' imprisonment or more. Also included are drink-driving and driving without insurance.

Around 22,500 people are entitled to diplomatic immunity in the United Kingdom and the majority of diplomats abide by UK law. The number of alleged serious crimes committed by members of the diplomatic community in the UK is proportionately low.

Under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations 1961, those entitled to immunity are expected to obey the law. The FCO does not tolerate foreign diplomats breaking the law.

We take all allegations of illegal activity seriously. When instances of alleged criminal conduct are brought to our attention by the police, we ask the relevant foreign Government to waive diplomatic immunity where appropriate. For the most serious offences, and when a relevant waiver has not been granted, we seek the immediate withdrawal of the diplomat.

Alleged serious and significant offences reported to the FCO in 2015 are listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Driving without insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Commonwealth Secretariat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causing or permitting the driving of a vehicle without insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Lucia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving a vehicle without insurance or a MOT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving under the influence of alcohol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual bodily harm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human trafficking into the UK for the purposes of exploitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>specifically domestic servitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human trafficking: slavery or servitude/forced or compulsory labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking an indecent photograph/pseudo-photograph of a child; and using threatening/abusive/insulting words or behaviour to cause harassment/alarm/distress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causimg a child aged 13 to 15 to watch/look at an image of sexual activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures for previous years are available in the Secretary for State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs' written statement to the House on 16 July 2015, Official Report, column 36WS (HCWS128, HLWS112, HLWS112).

[HCWS106]
International Criminal Justice: UK Support

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): Sunday 17 July marked the Day of International Criminal Justice, a perfect opportunity to look at the UK’s support of the principles of international justice and its various institutions.

International criminal justice and accountability is a fundamental element of our foreign policy. We continue to voice our support for this principle, and are committed to working with the International Criminal Court (ICC) and international tribunals. This work helps to strengthen the rules-based international system, reduce conflict and promote stability. We firmly believe that there must be no impunity for the most serious international crimes.

In 2015 we showed our commitment to international justice by contributing £7.6 million to the ICC, £3 million to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), £1.4 million to the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), and £1.8 million to the Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals (MICT). In July this year, Karadžić who was found guilty on one count of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, including the use of rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence as weapons of war and the recruitment and use of child soldiers. Their work acts as a deterrent to atrocities, placing a spotlight on individual responsibility, supporting victims and helping to establish an historical narrative of accountability.

The ICTY delivered its verdict this year on Radovan Karadžić who was found guilty on one count of genocide, five counts of crimes against humanity and four counts of violations of the laws or customs of war; and was sentenced to 40 years in prison. Karadžić was one of the highest ranking officials to be tried by the tribunal and his trial marked the biggest war crimes trial in Europe since Nuremberg. The judgment was long-awaited following a trial that lasted over four years.

The ICTR finished its judicial work at the end of 2015. The ICTR’s work over the last twenty years has been instrumental in developing international law and making sure that those most responsible for the genocide in Rwanda are held accountable. Its remaining functions were transferred to the Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals.

The FCO’s support for international criminal justice requires close co-operation with a wide range of stakeholders including partners across Government, law enforcement bodies, international organisations and non-government organisations. Over the next 12 months we will continue to work closely with these partners to ensure that our assessed and voluntary contributions to the ICC and other tribunals are used for maximum effect in the fight against impunity.

This is the fourth annual update to Parliament on the FCO’s work to support international justice.

[HCWS111]

British Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma): Copies of the British Council’s annual report and accounts for the 2015-16 financial year have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The report can also be found at the British Council’s website at: www.britishcouncil.org.

During the period the British Council received £161,650 grant-in-aid from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

[HCWS99]

Parliamentary Questions and Westminster Hall Debates: Corrections

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has recently reviewed all correspondence and parliamentary proceedings on the subject of allegations of breaches of international humanitarian law (IHL) in Yemen by the Saudi-led coalition. During this exercise it became clear that the drafting of answers to four written questions and two responses given in debates relating to allegations of breaches of IHL did not fully reflect HMG’s policy as set out in numerous other written questions and debates on this topic. I would like to clarify these.

The responses given on 12 February to Question 24770 (http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2016-01-28/24770)

and on 15 February to Questions 24769 (http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2016-01-28/24769)

and 24771 (http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2016-01-28/24771)

stated “we have assessed that there has not been a breach of IHL by the coalition”. However, these should have stated, as in previous PQs such as 27085 answered on 24 February, “we have not assessed that there has been a breach of IHL by the coalition”.

The FCO’s support for international criminal justice contributed towards their valuable work in entrenching the rule of law, fighting impunity for breaches of IHL by the coalition. During this exercise it became clear that the drafting of answers to four written questions and two responses given in debates relating to allegations of breaches of IHL did not fully reflect HMG’s policy as set out in numerous other written questions and debates on this topic. I would like to clarify these.

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and 24771 (http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2016-01-28/24771)

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The FCO’s support for international criminal justice
The response given on 4 January to Question 15523 (http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commens/2015-11-09/15523)

stated “I regularly review the situation with my own advisers and have discussed it on numerous occasions with my Saudi counterpart. Our judgement is that there is no evidence that IHL has been breached, but we shall continue to review the situation regularly”. However, this should have stated “I regularly review the situation with my own advisers and have discussed it on numerous occasions with my Saudi counterpart. Looking at all the information available to us, we have been unable to assess that there has been a breach of IHL by the Saudi-led coalition. The situation is kept under careful and continual review”.

During the Westminster Hall debate on Human Rights and Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia on 8 June (HC Deb, col WH138), the former Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington) said, “In respect of the allegations about breaches of international humanitarian law, the Ministry of Defence makes assessments of how the Saudis are acting and whether the coalition is observing international human rights obligations. The MOD assessment is that the Saudi-led coalition is not targeting civilians that Saudi processes and procedures have been put in place to ensure respect for the principles of international humanitarian law; and that the Saudis both have been and continue to be genuinely committed to compliance with international humanitarian law.” This should have said, “In respect of the allegations about breaches of international humanitarian law, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) analyses how the Saudis are acting and whether the coalition is observing international humanitarian law. The MOD has not assessed that the Saudi-led coalition is targeting civilians. We have assessed that Saudi processes and procedures have been put in place to ensure respect for the principles of international humanitarian law; and that the Saudis both have been and continue to be genuinely committed to compliance with international humanitarian law.”

During the Westminster Hall debate on War in Yemen: First Anniversary from 22 March (HC Deb, col WH518), I stated that, “we make it clear that we are doing our own assessments to understand whether the equipment we sell has any participation in that and indeed whether the breaches are by the Houthis or the Saudi Arabians.” This should have stated “we make it clear that we are doing our own analysis. We encourage the Saudis to conduct their own investigations to understand whether the equipment we sell has any participation in that and indeed whether the breaches are by the Houthis or the Saudi Arabians.”

These corrections ensure the answers given in all written questions and debates now accurately reflect HMG policy in this area and consistent with other statements and questions answered.

The MOD monitors incidents of alleged IHL violations using available information. This is used to form an overall view on the approach and attitude of Saudi Arabia to IHL. This, in turn, informs the risk assessment made under the consolidated criteria (i.e. whether there is a clear risk that it might be used in the commission of a serious violation of IHL). We are not acting to determine whether a sovereign state has or has not acted in breach of IHL, but instead—as Criterion 2(c) requires—we are acting to make an overall judgement.

It is important to make clear that neither the MOD nor the FCO reaches a conclusion as to whether or not an IHL violation has taken place in relation to each and every incident of potential concern that comes to its attention. This would simply not be possible in conflicts to which the UK is not a party, as is the case in Yemen.

We regularly encourage Saudi Arabia to investigate any allegations of breaches of IHL which are attributed to them; and for their investigations to be thorough and conclusive. Saudi Arabia has publicly stated that it is investigating reports of alleged violations, and that any lessons learned will be acted upon. We continue to believe that they have the best insight into their own military procedures, allowing them to understand what went wrong and apply the lessons learnt in the best possible way, if required. This is the standard we set ourselves and our allies. For example, when allegations have been made against us in Afghanistan and Iraq we have investigated these claims ourselves. We did not expect other states to do this and form judgments on our behalf.

[HCWS125]

Unpaid London Congestion Charge Bills and Fines

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The value of unpaid congestion charge debt incurred by diplomatic missions and international organisations in London since its introduction in February 2003 until 31 December 2015 as advised by Transport for London was £95,811,650. The table below shows those diplomatic missions and international organisations with outstanding fines of £100,000 or more.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of Fines</th>
<th>Total Outstanding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the United States of America</td>
<td>89,308</td>
<td>£10,626,970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Japan</td>
<td>59,533</td>
<td>£7,072,020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission of the Federal Republic of Nigeria</td>
<td>30,952</td>
<td>£6,045,440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Russian Federation</td>
<td>46,894</td>
<td>£5,485,360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of the High Commissioner for India</td>
<td>36,984</td>
<td>£4,489,825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany</td>
<td>35,706</td>
<td>£4,147,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Poland</td>
<td>29,304</td>
<td>£3,533,290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of the High Commissioner for Ghana</td>
<td>26,482</td>
<td>£3,186,530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the People’s Republic of China</td>
<td>24,002</td>
<td>£3,016,760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Sudan</td>
<td>24,466</td>
<td>£2,830,520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan</td>
<td>21,849</td>
<td>£2,665,255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya High Commission</td>
<td>19,497</td>
<td>£1,947,650</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of France</td>
<td>16,639</td>
<td>£1,970,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Spain</td>
<td>15,246</td>
<td>£1,811,520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Number of Fines</td>
<td>Total Outstanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the United Republic of</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>15,020</td>
<td>£1,744,075</td>
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<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Islamic Republic of</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>14,204</td>
<td>£1,740,700</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Korea</td>
<td>13,418</td>
<td>£1,631,700</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of Romania</td>
<td>12,812</td>
<td>£1,511,410</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of Greece</td>
<td>11,820</td>
<td>£1,396,627</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Cuba</td>
<td>11,435</td>
<td>£1,387,155</td>
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<tr>
<td>People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria</td>
<td>11,159</td>
<td>£1,159</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of Ukraine</td>
<td>11,503</td>
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<tr>
<td>South African High Commission</td>
<td>11,556</td>
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<td>Sierra Leone High Commission</td>
<td>11,081</td>
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<td>High Commission for the Republic of Hungary</td>
<td>8,680</td>
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<td>High Commission for the Republic of Cyprus</td>
<td>8,247</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Yemen</td>
<td>7,032</td>
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<td>High Commission for the Republic of Zambia</td>
<td>7,069</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria</td>
<td>6,667</td>
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<td>Embassy of the Republic of Belarus</td>
<td>5,646</td>
<td>£661,180</td>
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<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Cameroon</td>
<td>5,594</td>
<td>£649,760</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Slovak Republic</td>
<td>5,394</td>
<td>£629,100</td>
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<td>High Commission for the Republic of Malawi</td>
<td>5,220</td>
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<tr>
<td>Botswana High Commission</td>
<td>5,070</td>
<td>£609,330</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia</td>
<td>4,900</td>
<td>£565,310</td>
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<td>4,713</td>
<td>£553,885</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kingdom of Swaziland High Commission</td>
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<td>£545,395</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Zimbabwe</td>
<td>4,816</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Cote d’Ivoire</td>
<td>4,254</td>
<td>£500,510</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea</td>
<td>4,204</td>
<td>£489,065</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malta High Commission</td>
<td>4,050</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Austria</td>
<td>4,021</td>
<td>£479,410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania</td>
<td>3,832</td>
<td>£468,765</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mauritius High Commission</td>
<td>3,971</td>
<td>£462,535</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uganda High Commission</td>
<td>3,707</td>
<td>£441,615</td>
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<tr>
<td>High Commission of the Kingdom of Lesotho</td>
<td>3,754</td>
<td>£436,210</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Turkey</td>
<td>3,411</td>
<td>£415,035</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Liberia</td>
<td>3,396</td>
<td>£410,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Belgium</td>
<td>3,430</td>
<td>£408,035</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures for previous years are available in the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs written statement to the House on 16 July 2015, *Official Report*, column 39WS.

**Unpaid Parking Fines**

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): In 2015, 4,858 parking fines incurred by diplomatic missions and international organisations in London were brought to our attention by local councils, Transport for London and the City of London. These totalled £477,499.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has held meetings with a number of missions about outstanding parking fine debt. In addition, in May this year we wrote to diplomatic missions and international organisations...
concerned giving them the opportunity to either pay their outstanding fines or appeal against them if they considered that the fines had been issued incorrectly.

Subsequent payments (including amounts waived by the above authorities) totalled £161,328. There remains a total of £316,171 in unpaid fines for 2015.

The table below details those diplomatic missions and international organisations that have outstanding fines from 2015 totalling £1,000 or more, as of 21 June 2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diplomatic mission/international organisation</th>
<th>Amount of Outstanding Fines (excluding congestion charge)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of South Sudan</td>
<td>£53,708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Federal Republic of Nigeria</td>
<td>£41,531</td>
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<tr>
<td>Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>£20,692</td>
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<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Zambia</td>
<td>£18,212</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Liberia</td>
<td>£13,795</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of the Sudan</td>
<td>£13,429</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan</td>
<td>£11,885</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan</td>
<td>£10,950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>£8,425</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Côte d’Ivoire</td>
<td>£7,421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea</td>
<td>£7,305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Islamic Republic of Pakistan</td>
<td>£6,292</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of Tunisia</td>
<td>£6,020</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Angola</td>
<td>£5,775</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman</td>
<td>£5,415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Georgia</td>
<td>£4,871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysian High Commission</td>
<td>£3,705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of France</td>
<td>£3,669</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia</td>
<td>£3,352</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan</td>
<td>£3,255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone High Commission</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission of the United Republic of Tanzania</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of Libya</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the State of Qatar</td>
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<tr>
<td>High Commission of the Republic of South Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Democratic Republic of the Congo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Iraq</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Yemen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Gabonese Republic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Russian Federation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of Brazil</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kenya High Commission</td>
<td>£1,822</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the People’s Republic of China</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of Greece</td>
<td>£1,250</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commonwealth Secretariat</td>
<td>£1,235</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Arab Republic of Egypt</td>
<td>£1,150</td>
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</table>

Outstanding National Non-domestic Rates Bills

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The majority of diplomatic missions in the United Kingdom pay the national non-domestic rates (NNDR) due from them. Diplomatic missions are obliged to pay only 6% of the total NNDR value of their offices. This represents payment for specific services received such as street cleaning and street lighting.

Representations by protocol directorate of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to missions in 2016 led to the settlement of outstanding debts by a number of missions.

As at 27 June 2016, the total amount of outstanding NNDR payments, due before 31 December 2015, owed by foreign diplomatic missions as advised by the Valuation Office Agency is £907,976, an increase of 22% over the 2014 figure, as reported in the 2015 WMS (£743,858). However, £40,838 of this outstanding debt is owed by Syria— which is not currently represented in the UK and we have therefore been unable to pursue this debt. A further £87,020 is owed by Iran, the majority of which was accrued during its embassy’s closure between 2011 and 2015. The Iranian embassy has now reopened and the FCO will be requesting payment of what is owed. Four missions are responsible for just over a third of the remainder. We shall continue to urge those with NNDR debt to pay their dues.

Missions listed below owed over £10,000 in respect of NNDR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mission</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the People’s Republic of Bangladesh</td>
<td>£100,762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of the Sudan</td>
<td>£81,419</td>
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<td>Sierra Leone High Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Zimbabwe</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda High Commission</td>
<td>£36,885</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria</td>
<td>£35,257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Islamic Republic of Pakistan</td>
<td>£30,154</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Liberia</td>
<td>£27,170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysian High Commission</td>
<td>£26,917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Zambia</td>
<td>£25,886</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia</td>
<td>£22,924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia</td>
<td>£22,688</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kenya High Commission</td>
<td>£21,352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Albania</td>
<td>£21,258</td>
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<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Cameroon</td>
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<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka</td>
<td>£15,765</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of Ukraine</td>
<td>£15,675</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Angola</td>
<td>£12,719</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Gambia</td>
<td>£12,210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Côte d’Ivoire</td>
<td>£11,987</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figures for previous years are available in the Secretary for State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs’ written statement to the House on 16 July 2015, Official Report, column 43WS (HCWS133). [HCWS100]
Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 18 July. The Foreign Affairs Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL

A provisional report of the meeting and conclusions adopted can be found at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetinas/fac/2016/07/18/

The Foreign Secretary made clear to his counterparts that while the UK is leaving the EU, we have no intention of turning our back on Europe and will not in any way be abandoning our leading role in European co-operation.

In the aftermath of the attack in Nice, Ministers discussed the fight against terrorism. They observed a minute of silence at 12:00 to pay tribute. The agenda for the Council was adjusted to allow time for Ministers to discuss counter-terrorism in the aftermath of the Nice attack and recent events in Turkey.

Fight against terrorism

Ministers expressed their condolences following the Nice attack and underlined their determination to tackle terrorist threats and their readiness to continue supporting France. The Foreign Secretary emphasised his solidarity with France and made the argument for terrorism to be tackled at source across the globe. He confirmed that the UK would consider what further support could be offered in response to French requests.

Turkey

Ministers discussed the recent events in Turkey. The Council adopted conclusions.

EU global strategy

Ministers discussed the EU global strategy which was presented by HRVP at the European Council on 29 June. The Foreign Secretary set out the Government’s view that the strategy correctly identifies a number of important priorities, including the central role of NATO in providing European security. Ms Mogherini confirmed that the EU External Action Service would produce a written proposal on the implementation of the strategy. Options would be presented to member states in the autumn.

China

Ministers discussed the EU’s strategy towards China following the recent EU-China summit; and adopted Council conclusions. The Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Mr Johannes Hahn, reported that the EU had conveyed clear messages to China on over-capacity and the need to improve access to the Chinese market for EU companies. The Chinese side had raised market economy status. Member states welcomed the strategy.

Latin America

Ministers discussed EU relations with Latin America, focusing on Venezuela, Colombia and Cuba. Ms Mogherini underlined the importance of the forthcoming EU-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) Foreign Ministers meeting that will take place in the Dominican Republic on 25-26 October. She also welcomed the finalisation of the EU-Cuba political dialogue and co-operation agreement (PDCA). The Council also took note of recent positive developments in the Colombian peace process. Council conclusions were adopted on Venezuela.

Migration

Due to time constraints, Ms. Mogherini informed Ministers that she would provide an update in writing on the implementation of the migration partnerships envisaged in the conclusions of the June European Council.

Ministers agreed without discussion a number of measures:

- The Council adopted conclusions on Somalia.
- The Council adopted conclusions on Afghanistan.
- The Council adopted conclusions on Pakistan.
- The Council adopted conclusions on the recent outbreak of violence in South Sudan.
- The Council adopted the agenda for the EU-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Joint Council and ministerial meeting, held after the Foreign Affairs Council.
- The Council approved two decisions on the conclusion of a protocol to the EU-Lebanon Euro-Mediterranean agreement to take account of the accession of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania.
- The Council adopted a decision on the conclusion of a protocol to the EU-Lebanon Euro-Mediterranean agreement which enables Lebanon to participate in EU programmes.
- The Council adopted a common position in view of the eighth meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council with Albania, to take place in Brussels on 8 September 2016.
- The Council adopted a decision on the conclusion of a protocol which enables Azerbaijan to participate in EU programmes such as Creative Europe and Horizon 2020.
- The Council adopted a decision on EU priorities for the 71st United Nations General Assembly (September 2016 to September 2017).
- The Council adopted amending legal acts which transpose into EU law the recent UN Security Council resolution renewing UN sanctions on the Democratic Republic of Congo until 1 July 2017.
- The Council adopted a decision on the EU position on the EU-Central America Association Council.
- The Council adopted a code of conduct and discipline for EU civilian CSDP missions.
- The Council adopted a decision concerning the staff regulations of the European Union Institute for Security Studies.
- The Council approved a decision for a temporary relaxation of the rules of origin under the EU-Jordan-Euro-Mediterranean agreement so as to enhance Jordan’s exports to the Union and create additional employment opportunities, especially for Syrian refugees.
- The Council approved a decision on the signing and provisional application of a protocol to the EU-Egypt Euro-Mediterranean agreement to take account of the accession of Croatia to the EU.
- The Council adopted the EU and its member states’ position for the ministerial conference of the Union for the Mediterranean on employment and labour, which will take place in Jordan on 27 September.

[HCWS21]

NHS England’s annual report and accounts includes a self-assessment of performance which describes an organisation that has experienced a year of both progress and challenge. NHS England continues to deliver high-quality care as it progresses with implementing the vision set out in the five year forward view delivering constancy of direction, consistency of leadership and effectiveness of delivery.

In response, my annual assessment welcomes the good progress that NHS England has made against many of its objectives including managing the commissioning system. Additionally it has continued to deliver the specialised services and primary care commissioning systems and improved the operation and management of the NHS. There does, however, remain much to do in order to achieve our agreed goals by 2020. In particular, I have drawn attention to the need to address year-round performance against the standards reflected within the NHS constitution, many of which have been routinely missed this year, as well as the need to make further progress on achieving parity of esteem between physical and mental health.

Although NHS England met its objective to deliver financial balance in the commissioning system this year, the provider sector remains financially challenged. To achieve its financial objective in 2016-17, NHS England must work with its system partners and the Department of Health to jointly deliver a balanced budget across the NHS as well as delivering its share of the productivity and efficiency savings identified in the NHS five year forward view.

Overall NHS England has made progress during 2015-16 but there remains much more to do. The extra real-terms investment of £8.4 billion agreed as part of the 2015 spending review is evidence of this Government’s continuing commitment to the NHS. My Department and I will continue to work with NHS England and its partners to ensure that this investment is used to build on the good work seen so far and to deliver an NHS that provides safe, compassionate and reliable care for those who need it while living within its means.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-07-21/HCWS105/.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I am publishing today, following a 12-week public consultation, a Government response on how we will implement the healthcare education funding reforms. A copy can be found online.

The reforms, which are for England only, will mean that from 1 August 2017, all new undergraduate nursing, midwifery and allied health professional students on pre-registration courses will receive their student support through the student support system for fee loans and living costs support, rather than course fees and NHS bursaries for living costs paid by Health Education England. These students will therefore be subject to the same general student finance arrangements that apply to other undergraduate students in 2017-18.

Overall, the Government response will set out that the majority of these students, including those with children, will have access to more funds under the student loans system while at university; they will have access to at least 25% more living cost support and we are making additional offers on childcare, travel, dual accommodation and provision, in appropriate circumstances, for exceptional hardship funding.

The Government response also sets out transitional arrangements for pre-registration part time students, pre-registration postgraduate courses and dental hygiene and therapy courses applicable for new students commencing their studies in the academic year 2017-18.

The changes will mean we are able to accept more applicants for pre-registration nursing, midwifery and allied health degree courses who get the right grades than we have in the past. Currently two thirds of people who apply to university to become a nurse are not offered a place for training.

We have responded to feedback from key stakeholders, who took part in a constructive consultation, by providing extra funding to help cover additional expenses like travel and more support for students with children. We will work with nursing bodies, universities, hospitals and other partners in taking this forward.

These changes are only part of our plan to expand the NHS workforce—we are also opening up new routes into nursing support roles through apprenticeships for example, the new nursing associate role to widen access further to these professions. The Government are determined to ensure the NHS can adapt to the changing needs of our population, train more nurses in England and reduce the reliance on agency and overseas staff.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-07-21/HCWS126/.

NHS Shared Business Services

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): NHS Shared Business Services (SBS) has today published a statement regarding an issue with a mail redirection service which was formerly provided by NHS SBS on behalf of NHS England as part of the Primary Care Support Service.

This matter is also referred to in my Department’s annual report and accounts, published today, copies of which are available in the Vote Office and Printed Paper Office. I will of course keep the House updated in future...
as investigations are carried out by NHS England and Shared Business Services and as they seek to determine the effect of this issue.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-07-21/HCWS120/

[HCWS120]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Cedars Pre-departure Accommodation

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): I am today announcing the Government’s decision to close Cedars pre-departure accommodation, and replace it with new pre-departure accommodation near Gatwick Airport, as a discrete unit at Tinsley House immigration removal centre. This will maintain the required legal safeguards and focus on welfare for families with children whose return is to be ensured under the family returns process. The new pre-departure accommodation will be operated in line with the statutory framework established by the Immigration Act 2014, specifically in relation to the statutory time limit on stays at the facility and the requirement for the independent family returns panel to be consulted in advance in each case where it is proposed that a family should be placed there.

The Government met their commitment to end the routine detention of children for immigration purposes by fundamentally changing the way in which they deal with families that have no lawful basis of stay in the UK, and limiting the detention of unaccompanied children for removal. The new family returns model introduced in 2011 placed the welfare of the child at the heart of the process. Key parts of the family returns process, including the separate statutory status of pre-departure accommodation, were enshrined in the Immigration Act 2014. The new pre-departure accommodation will operate in line with both the statutory requirements and the wider family returns process, which will remain unchanged.

The low level of use of Cedars pre-departure accommodation over the last few years is a testament to the overall success of the family returns process and, in particular, to the fact that more families are accepting voluntary assistance to leave the UK when they no longer have a lawful basis to stay here. Cedars has from the outset only been intended to be used as a last resort, after all voluntary or other return options have failed, and following the advice of a panel of independent child safeguarding experts.

Stephen Shaw’s review into the welfare of vulnerable people in detention, while recognising that Cedars was an exceptional facility, recommended on value for money grounds that the Home Office should draw up plans either to close Cedars or to change its use as a matter of urgency. The Government accepted this recommendation, and have reviewed the most cost-effective way of providing the necessary component of pre-departure accommodation for the family returns process, while ensuring that safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the children involved remain a key priority.

The Government are committed to safeguarding the health and wellbeing of those detained in their care, some of whom may be vulnerable. They are very grateful to Barnardo’s for all its valuable work with families at Cedars and for working with us to ensuring that the new facility continues to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, and builds on the learning and experience of Cedars.

[HCWS114]

Countering Terrorism

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Keeping our people and interests safe—both here and overseas—is the primary duty of Government. The horrific attack in Nice last week was the latest terrible reminder that the threat from terrorism is more acute and more complex than ever before.

Today I have published the annual report for the Government’s counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST (Cm 9310). It covers developments in the terrorist threat and progress made in our counter-terrorism work in 2015. Copies of the report will be made available in the Vote Office.

The threat from terrorism to the UK and our interests continues to be driven by the situation in Syria and Iraq and, in particular, by Daesh, which has a dedicated external operations structure in Syria. The attacks in Paris in November, in which 130 people were killed, including one British national, demonstrated its ability to co-ordinate and direct complex mass-casualty attacks. The attack on tourists in Tunisia last June led to the death of 30 British nationals, the largest single loss of British life to terrorism since the London bombings in 2005. In March this year, 31 people were killed in the attacks in Brussels, including one British national. There have been further attacks in other parts of the world, including in Bangladesh, Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Daesh continues to use propaganda to encourage individuals from around the world to travel to the conflict area, including approximately 850 individuals of national security concern who have travelled from the UK. Daesh is not the only terrorist threat we face: the al-Qaeda grouping in Afghanistan and Pakistan and affiliate groups elsewhere continue to aspire to attack western interests.

The police and the security and intelligence agencies successfully disrupted six terrorist plots to attack Great Britain in 2015 due to their hard work and commitment to keep us safe. We have continued to ensure they have the powers and capabilities they need to disrupt terrorist threats, through the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015, and increased investigative and intelligence resources announced in the strategic defence and security review.

The success of our counter-terrorism effort also depends on a much broader range of domestic and international activity. Through our Prevent and intervention programmes we have worked to safeguard people at risk and challenge the twisted narratives that support terrorism. We have made borders and civil aviation more secure. We have strengthened our existing response to marauding terrorist firearms attacks.
The nature of terrorism in 2015 has underlined the need to look beyond solely domestic solutions. We have worked to ensure that international collaboration on counter-terrorism is matched with co-ordinated action which has lasting impact.

The CONTEST strategy has proven to be successful over a number of years. But our approach must continue to evolve to deal with the changing threat from terrorism. That is why we are currently reviewing CONTEST to ensure the highest priorities are given the right resources and that Government Departments and agencies have a unified approach. We will publish an updated strategy later this year.

[HCWS116]

Child Abuse and Neglect

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): The Minister for Children and Families (Edward Timpson) and I have today launched a public consultation which considers whether statutory measures focused on reporting and acting on child abuse and neglect should be introduced in addition to our wide-ranging reforms.

Social workers, teachers, police officers, doctors and countless others across the country work together every day to protect our children, making difficult judgements under challenging circumstances. The Government are undertaking a comprehensive programme of reform to deliver better outcomes for children in the children's social care system. We are improving the quality of front-line practice so that professionals such as police and social workers can respond effectively to the needs of individual children—and we are legislating through the Children and Social Work Bill to strengthen multi-agency arrangements for the protection of children following a review by Alan Wood CBE. We continue to consider what more can be done to protect children from abuse and neglect and the launch of this consultation exercise fulfils the commitments made during the passage of the last year’s Serious Crime Act and in the “Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation” report published in March 2015.

The consultation will run for the statutory maximum of 12 weeks and ends on 13 October 2016. We are seeking responses from anyone with a view on these important issues, from children and families to practitioners, academics and voluntary sector partners.

Copies of the consultation document have been placed in the Library of the House and are available on the Government’s website at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/departments%5B%5D=home-office%26publication_filter_option=consultations

[HCWS110]

National Crime Agency/UK International Crime Bureau

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The NCA was established to lead the fight to cut serious and organised crime, and to focus on the relentless disruption of serious and organised criminals. It has the power to task other law enforcement and a capability that reaches from local to international serious and organised crime impacting on the UK.

HMIC have conducted two inspections: the first, a re-inspection of the NCA following its 2014 inspection whereby HMIC carried out a review into the efficiency and effectiveness of the National Crime Agency. The second report focuses on the work of UK’s International Crime Bureau (UKICB) and its activities relating to identifying fugitives and extradition.

I have placed a copy of both reports in the Library of the House. I have asked HMIC to publish both reports on my behalf. They are available online at: www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk.

HMIC find in relation to its re-inspection of the NCA, that the NCA's approach to prioritising, supervising and managing investigations is rigorous, but that they could support their officers better by investing in more sophisticated equipment. They found that the NCA had an effective leadership approach to build systems and processes, and that while strategic governance arrangements for threats are at an early stage of development, there is a clear commitment from the NCA and its partners to work together on shared priorities.

HMIC’s second report examines the work of UKICB and its activities relating to identifying fugitives and extradition. This inspection, conducted between September and November last year and, picks up on themes from the last NCA report, focusing on the management of risks and the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the UKICB. Overall the report is very positive. HMIC find that UKICB are well led, that risks are assessed in a timely and prioritised manner, there are appropriate measures to mitigate the identified risks, and there is good and improving efficiency and effectiveness in the unit.

HMIC note that the work of UKICB is dependent on interactions with a wide range of stakeholders and that some matters are out their direct control. However, the report identifies a series of recommendations, many of which are in regard to better information gathering/ sharing and building on improving/changing relationships with stakeholders all of which should lead to better risk management and efficiencies in the extradition process.

Both reports note a number of areas for improvement— where the NCA already has action underway to improve its capabilities and effectiveness—and makes several recommendations. It is for the director general to respond to these recommendations, in line with the requirements of the Crime and Courts Act 2013.

[HCWS113]

PRIME MINISTER

Machinery of Government Change

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This written ministerial statement confirms the following Machinery of Government change.

The functions of the Office for Civil Society (OCS) have been transferred from the Cabinet Office to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The transfer will include responsibility for youth policy and the National Citizen Service. It will integrate OCS's
work to grow a stronger civil society with DCMS’s existing work to enrich lives. It will also simplify sponsorship responsibilities for the lottery providers.

OCS will continue its cross-Government work in support of the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector and their important contribution to public services and the social economy; and its work to promote social and community action, social investment, mission-led business and mutuals.

OCS’s functions relating to policy innovation (the Policy Lab) will remain in the Cabinet Office.

A Cabinet Office note setting out further detail on this change has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

It can also be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements.

[HCWS124]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Councils

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council met on 16 June 2016 in Luxembourg where Lord Freud, the Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions, represented the UK.

Ministers approved this year’s country specific recommendations (CSRs) under the European semester and endorsed the joint Social Protection Committee and Employment Committee opinion. In discussion all member states welcomed the better focus of the CSRs and argued that fewer but more specific CSRs were helpful. The UK welcomed the more focused approach, the importance given to employment policies as well as the recognition that unemployment can be a structural rather than cyclical problem.

Ministers noted progress reports on amending the carcinogens and mutagens directive and the revision of the posting of workers directive. The Commission (Thyssen) confirmed its intention to respond to the yellow card on the posting of workers directive during July.

Ministers adopted Council conclusions on “Combating Poverty and Social Inclusion: An Integrated Approach”, and on “A New Start for a Strong Social Dialogue” without discussion. Ministers also adopted a package of Council conclusions on gender and LGBTI equality. While there was some disappointment that the text was not stronger from a number of member states, the Council’s adoption of LGBTI conclusions for the first time was particularly welcomed by the UK among others.

The European Commission presented its new skills agenda followed by updates on the outcomes of this year’s UN Commission on the status of women meeting, and on international meetings related to the international dimension of social and employment policies.

The incoming Slovak presidency gave an outline of its work programme. Progress reports on the anti-discrimination directive; the European Accessibility Act; and the social partner agreement on the ILO work in fishing convention were all noted without discussion. Italy also introduced its proposal for a migration compact. Over lunch Ministers discussed social protection for the self-employed.

The informal Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council then met on 14-15 July in Bratislava. Lindsay Fullarton, Deputy Head of EU and International Affairs at the Department for Work and Pensions, represented the UK on the first day. Baroness Neville-Rolfe, Minister of State at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, represented the UK on the second day.

The Slovak presidency used the meeting to discuss the social and technological challenges in the future world of work.

The first day involved a plenary session on ageing of populations and the challenges this creates for labour markets and social security systems. The focus of most member state interventions was on migration, demographics and the scope of social protection systems. There was a strong consensus on the need for life-long learning, flexibility in labour markets and recognition of new patterns of work. There were differing views on whether highly skilled migrants were needed and how new ways of working would be covered by labour law, health and safety and social protection.

The second day involved a plenary session on how to address the impact of technological development on the quality of jobs and future skill needs. The UK intervened to highlight the importance of improving digital skills at all levels and the need for policies to address the difficulties of those left behind in society. Baroness Neville Rolfe explained that the UK’s flexible labour market aimed to not exclude these people and ensure their rights regardless of hours worked. Baroness Neville Rolfe’s intervention was echoed and supported by many Ministers who also noted that more needed to be done to ensure that new ways of working had full social, health and safety and labour law protection.

[HCWS97]
Petition

Wednesday 13 July 2016

OBSERVATIONS

TREASURY

Closure of Lloyds Bank in Bredbury

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the proposed closure of the Bredbury branch of Lloyds Bank will have a negative impact on the local area; further that vulnerable members of the community will struggle if the bank closes as most do not use online banking; further that the bank staff deal with many different situations with dignity and care which is vital in a community where there is a large elderly population; further that a number of dedicated staff will be made unemployed; and further that a local petition on this matter has been signed by 580 individuals.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to stop the closure of the Bredbury branch of Lloyds Bank.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by William Wragg, Official Report, 19 May 2016; Vol. 611, c. 242.]

Observations from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin):

The Government thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) for his petition on the planned closure of the Lloyds Bank branch in Bredbury.

The Government are sorry to hear about the disappointment of the residents of Bredbury at the planned closure of their local Lloyds Bank branch. Although we can understand their concerns, decisions on opening and closing agencies are taken by the management team of each bank on a commercial basis. As with other banking service providers, Lloyds Bank will need to balance customer interests, market competition, and other commercial factors when considering its strategy and the Government do not seek to intervene in these decisions.

However, the Government believe that banks should act in the best interests of their customers and continue to serve the needs of the consumer as well as the wider economy. In March 2015, the major high street banks, consumer groups and the Government signed up to an industry-wide agreement to work with customers and communities to minimise the impact of branch closures and put in place alternative banking services. This protocol commits the banks to:

- work with local communities to establish the impact of the branch closure, prior to its closure
- find suitable alternative provision to suit individual communities
- put satisfactory alternative banking services in place before a branch is closed. Options for this will include free to use cash machines, the proximity of alternative branches, and Post Office branches and mobile banking arrangements

The British Bankers’ Association has appointed Professor Russel Griggs to carry out an independent review of the protocol. The review will consider and identify best practice in implementation of the protocol and, if appropriate, make recommendations for amendments to the protocol to ensure it continues to meet its objectives. The Government look forward to seeing the conclusions of the review later this year.

It may be useful to note that many bank account providers already have an arrangement with the Post Office to provide access to their bank accounts, where customers can withdraw money, deposit cash and cheques and check balances at all 11,500 Post Office branches in the UK.

If other banks in the local area have more extensive facilities, and the residents of Bredbury wish to consider moving to an alternative bank, they may be interested in using the Current Account Switch Service. The switch service is free to use, comes with a guarantee to protect customers from financial loss if something goes wrong, and redirects any payments mistakenly sent to the old account for 36 months, providing further assurance for customers.
Ministerial Correction

Monday 11 July 2016

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

UK Involvement in Rendition

The following is an extract from the Adjournment debate on 29 June 2016.

Mr Ellwood: The Government are certainly co-operating fully with the Intelligence and Security Committee’s inquiry. The ISC has confirmed to the Government that it has received all but one of the relevant documents to date, but if it requires any further documents, it only needs to let the Government know.


Letter of correction from Mr Ellwood:

An error has been identified in the response given to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) during the Adjournment debate on UK involvement in rendition.

The correct response should have been:

Mr Ellwood: The Government are certainly co-operating fully with the Intelligence and Security Committee’s inquiry. The ISC has confirmed to the Government that it has received all the relevant documents to date, but if it requires any further documents, it only needs to let the Government know.
Ministerial Correction

Thursday 14 July 2016

JUSTICE
Safety of Prison Staff

The following is an extract from the urgent question on the Safety of Prison Staff on 11 July 2016.

Michael Gove: I hope the hon. Lady will excuse me as I turn to my notes in order to give her the exact figure. The last year for which we have figures was 2014-15 and the National Tactical Response Group was called out 400 times during that year, so that was just over once every day.


Letter of correction from Michael Gove:

An error has been identified in the response given to the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) during the urgent question on the Safety of Prison Staff.

The correct response should have been:

Michael Gove: I hope the hon. Lady will excuse me as I turn to my notes in order to give her the exact figure. The last year for which we have figures was 2014-15 and the National Tactical Response Group was called out 360 times during that year, so that was just over once every day.
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